

Lowell Sun (Massachusetts)

March 30, 2006 Thursday

Romney supports immigration program, but not granting 'amnesty'

BYLINE: The Lowell Sun

SECTION: TODAY'S HEADLINES

LENGTH: 295 words

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

Gov. Mitt Romney expressed support yesterday for an immigration program that places large numbers of illegal residents on the path toward citizenship, but criticized any form of "amnesty."

Speaking to reporters after a speech on education reform, Romney also invited outgoing White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, a Holbrook native, to challenge Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., in midterm elections this fall.

Romney's comments came as the Senate began heated debate on immigration reform. On Monday, the Judiciary Committee approved a controversial bill sponsored by Kennedy and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., that would make 11 million illegal immigrants eligible for citizenship.

"I don't believe in amnesty," Romney said, using a word voiced by Republicans to describe widespread forgiveness of illegal residency in the United States.

But at the same time, Romney said illegal immigrants should have a chance to obtain citizenship.

"I don't believe in rounding up 11 million people and forcing them at gunpoint from our country," Romney said. "With these 11 million people, let's have them registered, know who they are. Those who've been arrested or convicted of crimes shouldn't be here; those that are here paying taxes and not taking government benefits should begin a process towards application for citizenship, as they would from their home country."

The McCain-Kennedy bill would legalize the 11 million immigrants if they demonstrate they've paid taxes, can speak English, pass a civics test, pay \$2,000 in fees and aren't criminals.

Massachusetts saw its illegal immigrant population increase from an estimated 55,000 people in 1990 to 200,000 people in 2004, according to a recent report by the Pew Hispanic Center

-- EVAN LEHMANN