Bill seeks to make English official language of Wisconsin

By Michael Phillis of the Journal Sentinel

Madison — Another legislator is making another attempt to make English the official language of Wisconsin.

Rep. André Jacque (R-De Pere) recently proposed the legislation, saying "failure to gain proficiency with the English language keeps you from achieving the American dream."

Jacque said he hoped the bill would be a unifying measure attracting a broad range of support. The majority of states have such a law.

But legislation recognizing English as the official state language has been proposed in previous sessions and did not make it. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester) was a co-sponsor of a previous bill with similar goals.

Some Assembly Democrats don’t agree with Jacque's bill, arguing it would make life more difficult for someone trying to learn English.

"Jacque’s proposal makes zero sense when we are imploring our students and young people to prepare for jobs and economic growth for America in a global economy," Rep. Josh Zepnick (D-Milwaukee) said in a statement. "Many high school and college students not just in Milwaukee but throughout Wisconsin, are not only learning another language, some are picking up a third or more."

When asked how the bill would change daily life in Wisconsin, Jacque said: "That is something that you might want to ask the League of Municipalities. I believe they would tell you they would see some cost saved as a result from printing."

He backed up his claim by forwarding an email he had received in support of his bill from Heidi Ozminkowski of Green Bay.

"This move has the foresight to save taxpayer dollars which is very much needed," Ozminkowski said in the email. Ozminkowski's parents immigrated to America from Germany and they expected to have to learn English.

The bill would prohibit the use of another language in government function except when one of eight circumstances arose — such as criminal or victim defense, health and safety issues, or promoting trade.

Jacque said he thought the idea had popular support, adding, "A vast majority of Hispanics strongly believe English should be an official language." He said he based the statement in part on a 2006 Zogby poll posted on a website promoting the establishment of English as an official language.

Christine Neumann-Ortiz, executive director of Voces de la Frontera, an immigrant rights group, said the legislation could be damning. "This will definitely disenfranchise people from critical parts of society."

"(Some) need access to a bilingual ballot to make an informed vote."

She said the notion that a majority of Hispanics supported the bill was "ridiculous," adding that such legislation helped explain why Republicans overwhelming lost Latinos in the last presidential election.