

Aurora Day Laborers Find Unwelcome Mat on Colfax

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Tue Dec 04, 2007 at 07:44 AM MST

For nearly a decade, day laborers have solicited work near the corner of Colfax and Dayton in Aurora. The long-blighted area is at the heart of an urban renewal effort already underway.

Advocates for workers, who are trying to open a day labor center in the area, insist the men must be allowed to gather near the busy corner. But that doesn't sit well with some business owners and others who would like to see the area swept clean of drifters.

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do not stand here anymore."

For six years, Sandra Gutierrez allowed day laborers to gather and wait for work in the parking lot next to her small shop, which is stuffed to the ceiling with food, cosmetics, sweets and souvenirs from Mexico and Central America. But last month she put up a chain link fence and signs reading "Private Property" in large red letters. Written in black marker is a message to the workers: "Please

"I had been telling the workers for a long time that if there continued to be problems, I was going to close the area off," said Gutierrez, owner of Aguila Express.

Gutierrez has a front-row seat to a conflict that has been brewing over the presence of day laborers in downtown Aurora. Her shop sits within an area of East Colfax between Dayton and Florence streets that has been notorious for prostitution, drug dealing and pawn shops. Long criticized for doing too little to fix problems, and anxious to improve Aurora's image, the city has implemented an **urban renewal project** to give the area a multimillion dollar facelift. There are plans to spruce up Aurora City Park and create a pedestrian district with galleries and cafes, all a stone's throw from the city's landmark Fox Theatre. But it's unclear how day laborers fit into the plan.

"City staff respond to complaints from the community, and we have received some regarding the day laborers," Gabrielle Johnston, spokeswoman for Aurora officials, wrote in an e-mail. "More importantly, however, we try to ensure everyone's safety."

Contractors needing extra hands for landscaping, construction, moving and cleaning have been seeking day labor at the corner of Dayton and Colfax for nearly a decade.

On a frigid Wednesday morning, a handful of men stood on the sidewalk outside a vacant furniture store with a faded marquee. A few more lingered across the street outside the Salon de Belleza Michoacán and Panadería El Paisa. Others gathered at nearby Aurora City Park one block off Colfax.

They continue to come despite tensions surrounding their presence that have been simmering since the workers first began gathering in the area around the corner.

Last fall, the Aurora City Council considered but failed to pass an ordinance that would have prohibited "vehicle solicitation" by employers on certain streets. It would have also required employers to tell the workers up front how much they will earn and how they will be treated if hurt on the job.

This past summer, Gutierrez was warned by police after Able Body Labor, located around the corner from her store, complained she was violating a zoning code that mandates temporary employment agencies be at least 1,500 feet apart. Although workers gathered on the street do not meet the definition of an employment office, city officials maintained that Gutierrez was running afoul of other business district and zoning codes. Gutierrez says police threatened to ticket her, but after a meeting with city and police officials, attorneys and day labor advocates, she says she heard nothing more of the matter.

But pressure from the city is not the reason Gutierrez decided to put up the fence. She wasn't even ruffled by the anonymous, hate-filled phone calls she received from people demanding she go back to Mexico. She's from El Salvador and has been in the United States for 30 years.

The problem for Gutierrez was that the presence of the workers had attracted a few unsavory types that drank, used drugs and even solicited prostitutes on her property. After months of pleading with the workers to try and keep the troublemakers out of

their midst, the problems continued, and Gutierrez had to draw the line.

"I have to protect my business and my customers," she said from behind a glass case displaying stacks of international calling cards. "If they had paid attention to me and straightened up, they'd still be out there because they didn't bother me."

But they bother Norma Nuñez, owner of La Cueva, a neighborhood institution that has been serving Mexican food for 33 years at the restaurant on Colfax at Dayton Street. She is unhappy to see men lingering late into the morning across the street, but she is relieved they no longer gather in front of her business as they once did.

"Everyone has to make a dollar, but I think it looks really bad to see a group of 10 or 15 men standing there - it makes people uneasy," Nuñez said. "But we are never going to get rid of (the workers). What we need is an understanding with them that they can be there and wait for work but only until 9 a.m. at the latest."

The workers may be unwelcome to some in the area, but the vibe isn't likely to drive them away. As business owners and city officials put their foot down, the workers merely migrate a few hundred feet in either direction but never far from the corner of Colfax and Dayton.

Jose Antonio Rodriguez, 53, originally from Chihuahua, comes to the corner most days in search of work. He says it doesn't much matter where he stands as long as employers can see him.

"We used to be over there," he said, gesturing beyond the silver fence behind him, "now we're over here. So the employers used to go there, now they come here."

But being out on the street waiting for work unnerves Enrique Trejo, who preferred soliciting work on private property. Trejo, 42, from Tamaulipas, Mexico, has lived in the United States for 16 years. His five children are U.S. citizens. But with all the news reports of workplace raids, mass deportations, and new state and local immigration laws, Trejo says he is terrified of being separated from his family. As he talks his eyes wander as though he were assessing the threat and planning his escape.

"For 15 years in this country I felt free. I wasn't afraid the police would stop me; I was comfortable in my home, but not anymore. When you are scared of one thing, you

become scared of everything. That kind of fear kills your confidence, and it's hard to recover."

Advocates for the day laborers insist that the men need to remain in the immediate vicinity because that's where the work is. A coalition of immigrant-rights groups is trying to find a building in the area to rent and turn into a nonprofit day labor center. The center would be modeled after **El Centro Humanitario** in Denver, which promotes the rights of day laborers by offering them education, job skills training and legal advice.

"We have to address the issue that there are increasing numbers of immigrants moving into Aurora because they can't afford housing in Denver," said Minsun Ji, executive director of El Centro Humanitario. "We need to find a place and bring our allies in, which will give us a little bit of presence in that area."