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Hayward council votes to open day-worker center
Proposal to establish facility on South Tennyson road met with little opposition
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HAYWARD — As an "attractive and safe alternative" to having day laborers congregate on Tennyson Road, the City Council has voted to establish an indoor day worker center in South Hayward.

The hiring hall, the city's first, also will serve as a one-stop shop where the workers — most of them undocumented Latin-American immigrants — can learn English and get assistance with health care and other basic needs.

"I think we have people in this city who are in need, whether they were born here or not," said Councilwoman Barbara Halliday, calling the future center an effort to "do the humanitarian thing and help relieve some of that suffering."

The council voted 5-1 earlier this month to establish the center by awarding an \$86,000 contract to local nonprofit group South Hayward Parish. The

41-year-old organization, which is a coalition of local faith groups, will operate the program inside the auditorium of the Eden Youth and Family Center on Tennyson and Ruus roads.

Councilman Bill Quirk voted against funding the center, saying the program was too costly. Councilwoman Doris Rodriguez abstained from voting and excused herself from the hearing because she is a South Hayward Parish boardmember.

Mayor Mike Sweeney supported the move, echoing other council members when he said the primary objective should be getting workers and the contractors who hire them out of parking lots and off city streets.

City leaders, neighbors and local merchants have engaged in a yearlong public debate over what to do about the crowds of immigrant day workers who gather on Tennyson Road each morning and afternoon looking for hourly jobs.

But the City Hall hearing was surprisingly absent of contention. No one spoke during the public comments portion of the hearing, though some council members had anticipated opposition to their use of public money to assist immigrants who entered the country illegally.

"The concerns are that we are helping undocumented immigrants, non-U.S. citizens," Halliday said before going on to argue why she believes the center is important.

Quirk said his opposition to approving the hiring hall was based on its cost, including potential legal liabilities. His attempt to get the rest of the council to reject funding the center was met with silence.

Quirk said the program will take money out of the social services budget that could otherwise be used to "pay for sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry."

City Manager Jesus Armas said the city can afford the project.

The approval allows South Hayward Parish about 18 months to attempt to run the center before the program is re-evaluated to determine its effectiveness. Much of the \$86,000 will go toward staffing — the program coordinator will be paid a \$40,000 salary and an outreach worker will get \$30,000.

But the day worker center's future operators said the bulk of the program — about \$250,000 worth of services — will be paid for with charitable donations.

The Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center, for instance, has already committed more than \$61,000 annually in low-cost primary care services and St. Rose Hospital committed an additional \$8,000. A bevy of other organizations have committed services ranging from legal help to job-referral expertise.

The Hayward Adult School is providing \$35,000 for English classes and classroom infrastructure.

The council said they chose South Hayward Parish over three other organizations that also wanted the contract because the group already knows the issues that the workers and local residents and businesses face.

"I think they really understand this issue more than anyone else in town," said Councilman Kevin Dowling.

The organization, unlike two of the others that applied, has never run a day-labor program.

But said it has already been working closely with day laborers and surveyed 50 of them this fall to get a sense of their needs.

According to the group's findings, 87 percent of the workers interviewed were ages 17 to 30. Eighteen percent spoke some English. Eighty-six percent were bilingual in Spanish and an additional indigenous language, such as the Mayan language K'iche'. And most were from Guatemala.

Asked what their top pressing issues were in order of importance, they listed English classes as the most important, followed by jobs and wages, health care in Spanish, labor violations and immigration assistance.

As part of their program, the South Hayward Parish will be holding contractors to the city's living wage ordinance of \$10 per hour and monitoring labor standards. Acknowledging that day laborer centers have a high failure rate, they said the biggest challenge will be in making both the workers and people who hire them feel comfortable about coming to the center.

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