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Herndon Approves Day Labor Center

Immigration Called 'Out of Our Control' By Lisa Rein

Washington Post Staff Writer

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The Herndon Town Council last night approved the creation of a formal, taxpayer-funded gathering spot for day laborers, saying the chaos in a 7-Eleven parking lot where the workers now gather would only worsen if it did nothing.

The council members, in a 5 to 2 vote that several called the hardest decision in their public service, said they did not want to sanction illegal immigration, the chief concern of opponents of the center. Many of the workers the facility would serve are in the United States illegally from Mexico and Central America.

But council members said they were helpless in the face of what they called a federal failure to police U.S. borders. They said it was their responsibility to bring order to a neighborhood nuisance that had become the town's most divisive issue in recent history.

"Here we sit, expecting this local government to resolve a national immigration problem that is out of our control," council member Harlon Reece said before the vote.

The vote, which came after the fifth hearing on the issue since last month, culminated a tense summer in the small town in northwest Fairfax County, which has been drawn into a national debate on immigration policy, human rights and the role of local governments in international issues.

Project Hope and Harmony, a social services agency, was seeking a permit to build and operate a worker center near the Loudoun County line. The approval means the town will help fund the center with \$175,000 in public money.

The dissenters said a vote to spend public money on a laborer site would amount to an endorsement of illegal immigration.

Still, council member Dennis D. Husch, who opposed the measure along with Ann V. Null, denounced the region's representatives in Congress. "Shame on them for their cowardly retreat," Husch said.

In recent weeks, radio talk shows, cable news and Internet blogs fumed that taxpayer money would help immigrants who might be in the country illegally. They advised rounding up such immigrants instead.

Some supporters of the site countered with accusations of racism. But at its core, the debate reflected the struggle in Herndon and other Washington suburbs to integrate a steady flow of new immigrants -- those here legally and illegally.

"This has been a horrendously difficult issue," Mayor Michael O'Reilly said. He said every worker has a constitutional right to "stand on a street corner whether they have documents or not."

As a condition of the permit granted to Project Hope, the nonprofit group must distribute information to contractors telling them that hiring undocumented immigrants is illegal. But Project Hope officials said they will not ask the laborers to disclose their status.

The speakers last night -- the carry-over crowd from a seven-hour hearing Tuesday in Herndon's small council chambers -- were evenly split about the proposed site as they testified before the television cameras that lined the aisles.

Opponents from Herndon and as far away as Colorado called for stepped-up police enforcement, legislative changes and an end to the hiring of undocumented workers. Some homeowners said the day laborers are sinking property values. And they said that by using public money to help the workers, Herndon would be committing a crime by supporting illegal immigration.

Supporters cited the biblical exhortation to love thy neighbor and begged the council not to allow the community to turn its back on its less-fortunate members. They said the problem is not immigration but a neighborhood conflict over noise, littering and safety.

"This controversy will not disappear if we . . . maintain the status quo," said Stef Woods, a lawyer for Just Neighbors, a group that helps immigrants.

Each side blamed the other for the animosity in the town, where foreign-born residents now make up 38 percent of the 22,000 residents.

"I am not a bigot," said Cathy McNary of Herndon, whose family is from the Philippines. "I cleaned bathrooms. . . . But I chose Herndon to raise my family because it was a town known for safety. Now it is known as a place where the day laborers may be."

Undercurrents of race and history resonated on both sides.

One speaker Tuesday night testified that the day laborers represent the "comeuppance of the white man" over the conquest of Native Americans hundreds of years ago.

Several day laborers also stepped forward to plead for an organized place to gather.

"We want a secure site, because our lives are in danger when the contractors leave us on the road," Eric Arauz said through an interpreter. "We are honest workers, not criminals, like they say."

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