

Forum Discusses Worker Center Proposal Town meeting slated for Tuesday.

By Bonnie Hobbs
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A.J. Dwoskin, who owns most of the Centreville Square Shopping Center, is serious about establishing a worker center for Centreville's day laborers. He's even offered to provide a trailer for this purpose on property he owns, behind the shopping center.

Currently, the day laborers gather outside the Centreville Regional Library, much to the consternation of library staff, local residents and nearby business owners in Centreville Square and Centrewood Plaza. So if the worker center becomes a reality, employers could go there instead to hire laborers.

It would get the workers off the street and also be a place where they could receive English classes, plus information about services available to them. Dwoskin would set up the trailer and pay for utilities, but he's asked the Centreville Immigration Forum (CIF) to head the worker center's daily operation.

"The CIF is at a crossroads," said its leader, Alice Foltz, at the group's regular meeting, Tuesday, May 25. "We've been presented with a big challenge as we think about the issues that lie ahead."

"Centreville is a changing community, in many ways," she continued. "It's not just Hispanics who've come here, but people from many other corners of the world. Our focus wasn't to start a day-labor center; the CIF began as a discussion about a way to incorporate all of this diversity into Centreville."

Foltz said the Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Wellspring churches all have outreach programs to new, low-income immigrants in Centreville, and these churches have come together to support each other in providing services to this population.

She also noted that Edgar Aranda of the Legal Aid Justice Center "has been a huge help to us, reaching out to the workers on the corner so we could get to know them and their needs." Then some two dozen CIF members discussed how a worker center here might operate and the estimated financial cost to run it.

SEVERAL CIF MEMBERS, plus some of the laborers, visited a worker center in Shady Grove, Md., last week to learn more its operation, and Marci Huntsman presented a report about it. “CASA of Maryland has operated five sites there for 25 years — so it works,” she said.

“It takes a lot of care and intentionality on behalf of everyone involved,” said Huntsman. “Certain things are particularly important — good relationships, information gathering and workers helping make decisions about the center’s functioning.”

She said trust and good relationships between the workers and center, employers and center, workers and employers, and workers among each other are crucial.

In addition, said Huntsman, the center must obtain information about the number of workers — both skilled and unskilled — it serves, how many are hired, the hours they work, and the identification of all the vehicles coming to the center. That way, employers would be more likely to pay them for their work.

“At CASA, a manager is available 24/7,” said Huntsman. “So, for example, if a worker believes a worksite is unsafe, he can call the manager.” Hours are Monday-Saturday, 6 a.m.-2 p.m., although workers may also be picked up on Sundays.

And although some Centreville residents fear a worker center here could cause problems, it doesn’t have to be that way. In fact, according to the Shady Grove manager, said Huntsman, “There are no problems because the reputation of the workers, center and employers is at stake.”

The center has its own rules and regulations, plus county regulations and safety standards for worksites. “People there know who’s coming to the center, and from where,” said Huntsman. “And the center’s relationship with the police and local government is good.” Furthermore, she said, “Workers there get a photo ID card — which is recognized in Montgomery County as a second form of ID. There’s also a \$25/year membership fee for the workers.”

Huntsman noted, as well, that the Bank of America there offers free checking and savings accounts for the workers. They only need a passport from their home country, not a Social Security number. The bank also made it easier for them to send money to their families back home.

So in Maryland, at least, worker centers seem to be co-existing within their communities just fine. Said Foltz, “Seeing the way that center operated made us think this is possible here.”

“THE WORKERS who came with us had questions about how to create the center’s rules, so they’re engaged in this process,” added Aranda. “Thirty workers also visited the site here and were interested in how it’s going to work — and when they’re involved, it works better.”

CIF member Michael Morse discussed a possible budget for the center. He said the CIF’s budget committee believes it’ll cost a minimum of \$60,000/year “to attract somebody superbly qualified” to be the center’s director. He also noted that two assistants would also be needed to manage the site daily and answer urgent questions on Sundays.

Morse estimated the center’s annual operating cost at \$250,000 — mainly for salaries. But the public wouldn’t bear any of the cost; it would be funded through private donations and grants. “We want to make this a success,” said Morse. “We want it to be fair and equitable; we’re concerned about justice.”

“A worker center can resolve community concerns, as well as provide better safety for the workers,” said Foltz. “The challenge for us now is to come together to make the idea a reality.”

Agreeing, local resident Claudia Escobar said, “The workers have gone through a lot of turmoil and are so thankful that someone wants to help them. They’re motivated, they can’t wait until this goes forward and they’re looking forward to their future. Now we need people to understand what we’re trying to do for our community.”

“Worker centers have been in Maryland so long that they’ve made friends in the community,” said Clifton’s O.G. Harper. “But it takes awhile to reach that point. It’s a long journey, but I think — if everyone’s supportive and works hard — it can be successful.”



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