

Proposed Center Ignites Crowd  
Hundreds attend public meeting on day laborers in Centreville.

By Bonnie Hobbs  
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At times, many of those attending Tuesday night's meeting about a proposed, day-labor center in Centreville sounded like a group of children. They cheered and clapped wildly for those espousing their point of view and laughed at and derided those who didn't.

More than once, the nearly 300 people packing the cafeteria at Centre Ridge Elementary were told to be civil and courteous. And at the outset, Supervisor Michael R. Frey (R-Sully), who hosted the event, acknowledged that "this is an emotional issue; there's a lot of passion."

But, he added, "We're not going to have a discussion of national immigration policy. We're going to try to deal with a local problem — day laborers gathering in the streets and sidewalks, and a proposed worker center. We want to see if people think it's better to have them in a less-visible, more-controlled place than what we have now."

Frey said this situation has existed in Centreville many years and people have complained to him about it. "But Fairfax County has no legal authority to enforce immigration laws," he said. "People's immigration status is checked if they're arrested."

A.J. Dwoskin, owner of the Centreville Square Shopping Center, said the laborers have congregated in some seven spots around the shopping center and nearby library for five years. Adding a security guard and a fence didn't help so, in December, he called Frey "out of frustration, to see if we could deal with this in another way."

Eventually, Dwoskin said he'd provide a trailer to house a worker center behind Centreville Square, if the Centreville Immigration Forum (CIF) — which has met and tried to help the day laborers — would run it. That way, he reasoned, the workers would be out of sight and employers could hire them there, instead.

"We have 120-plus tenants at our shopping center, and we get many complaints, asking what we're going to do about the day



Hilda Rexach says the day laborers pay rent here and have families to feed, just like everyone else.



Sully District Supervisor Michael R. Frey listens as speakers line up at the public meeting.



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laborers,” said Dvoskin. He also praised the CIF members who’ve “shown commendable leadership dealing with a difficult problem.”

THEN THE AUDIENCE spoke, and the majority of those speaking opposed the worker center. However, CIF head Alice Foltz said afterward that, because only those with questions were asked to speak, hardly any of those in favor of it did, because they had no questions.

Still, there was no mistaking the bitterness and anger of those vehemently against the idea. “We can decide to facilitate this decision right now, or put a cap on it, like Prince William has done,” said Clifton’s Elizabeth Schultz to loud applause. “Why are we facilitating illegal immigrants? We should deputize our law-enforcement officers so they can scoop them off the streets and get rid of a five-year problem.”

Lisa Kershes of Newgate said the center would benefit retailers and developers, “but no one’s taking into account the feelings of the residents. [After its crackdown], Prince William had a 16-percent reduction in their costs to deal with the illegals.”

Although no decision’s been made about the center, Walney’s Frederick Peterson said he was “profoundly disappointed in my political representation for not supporting the wishes of the people who got them elected. The problem is illegal aliens in this country costing the taxpayers huge amounts of money.”

Margarita Reagan of Centre Ridge said, “There are no regulations requiring people to use the facility, or the day laborers to go there for work.”

But, replied Foltz, “Right now, Centreville has an unorganized worker center that exists all over several corners. This would be organized and would respond to people’s concerns about crime, safety and getting the workers to pay taxes. The workers are glad to have this possibility. Right now, many of them work and aren’t paid — a system that’s not fair to anybody. We’ve visited a site in Maryland that’s successful. They’d have to abide by rules and regulations.”

Gary Malm, owner of Centreville Tire & Auto, said the proposed center would be a stone’s throw from the back of his business and would have a negative impact on it. “I’d worry about vandalism and the perception of safety there for people dropping off their

vehicles at night,” he said. “And I don’t want people to boycott the shopping center.”

Del. Tim Hugo (R-40th) said the worker center would be “a magnet for more problems and loitering.” He mentioned a new state law he co-sponsored which takes effect July 1. It allows counties to regulate the sale of goods and services and the solicitation of contributions along roadways.

BUT FAIRFAX COUNTY’S Board of Supervisors would have to approve it, and Frey said Sully District police are already stretched thin, “without officers sitting at the library watching people trying to get a job cutting grass for the day. It’s a matter of priorities, and we don’t have the money or resources in the county police department to enforce this. I suggest Hugo ask the state police to come do it.”

Furthermore, said Frey, “The law says you can’t be selective about what you enforce. You’d also have to ban the Centreville athletic boosters from soliciting money for a carwash, as well as the Little League and firefighters soliciting donations for muscular dystrophy.”

Police Capt. John Piper, commander of the Sully District Station, said his 108 sworn officers cover 70 square miles and, “sometimes, I have as few as eight people” to do so. Officers can look for violations in the shopping center, but can’t patrol it. Call us if you see problems there.”

Frank Di Maio contended that laborers prefer to solicit jobs on a main road, instead of from indoors. “We have to say no,” he said. “Even though we don’t have the power to remove these people, we don’t have to abet them and enable their illegal behavior. This solution is absolutely, totally misguided.”

An employee of the Giant Foods store in the neighboring Centrewood Plaza, Marsha Goodman said the laborers hang out there now, after hours, and will still do so, even if they have a center. Baskin-Robbins owner Rayman Hamid told how a drunk laborer coming into his store hurt his business.

Another Centreville resident likened the situation to him not wanting to clean up bird droppings in his yard, or a child pretending to clean his room, by throwing his toys in a closet. Having a worker center, he said, would be “hiding the problem,” not solving it.

However, Nathan Snow, a member of Centreville Presbyterian Church, said people have forgotten about showing kindness to strangers and that “mob rule is not good law.” And Centre Ridge’s Jim Daniels — who’s also a Centreville Square tenant — commended Frey and Dwoskin and said, “I wholeheartedly support this.”

“WHAT WILL ENSURE that employers will use this center?” asked Rose Charvan of Centre Ridge. Foltz told her the workers said they’ll use it and employers will have to go there to hire them. “There’ll be ESL opportunities, and two paid staff people would be on duty, at all times, plus volunteers,” said Foltz. She said no county dollars would go into it; funding would come from grants and private donations.

London Towne’s Stan Bromberg said the trailer would be on private property and the people at Tuesday’s meeting have no say. Frey said they have a right to voice their concerns, but Laurel Patton of Singleton’s Grove was appalled at how they did it.

“I’ve heard people referred to here tonight as bird droppings, drunks and criminals,” she said. “I’d like to see every group of people treated with respect, and I think this center is a way to help a little bit. I’m not going to be afraid of a group of people trying to get work.”

Hilda Rexach said the laborers live in this community, too, and need jobs to pay rent. “They go to stores and buy things, like you do,” she told the crowd. “Many have families to feed and are [often] abused by employers. With a center, there’s safety for everyone.”

Some contended it would attract immigrants from elsewhere, but Frey doubted that people would come here from Manassas to sit in a trailer. “If it doesn’t work, it’s a trailer — it could be moved away in a couple hours,” he said. “At least, it’s an effort to try something.” Ultimately, it’s Dwoskin’s decision, but he said he wants to work with the community on the solution.

Oak Hill’s Barbara Caputo has worked with immigrants and called them sincere, grateful people. “This may not be a perfect solution,” she said. “But it has merit, so please give this a chance.”

Frey said the two options are the center or the status quo:

“Standing on the streets or sidewalks is not a crime.” He urged people to send comments to him at 4900 Stonecroft Blvd., Chantilly, VA 20151 or [sully@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:sully@fairfaxcounty.gov).



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