

Published: Wednesday, June 9, 2010

Day labor center plan stirs immigration debate *by Kali Schumitz/Staff Writer*

This story was corrected on June 9, 2010. An explanation follows the story.

A heated discussion about a proposal to deal with day laborers in Centreville is again drawing the community into a debate about immigration.

For the past five years, the area between the Centreville Library and the Centreville Shopping Center has become an informal gathering spot for primarily Hispanic men seeking a day's work in construction, landscaping or other temporary jobs.

Now, the owner of the shopping center is offering to place a trailer on his property and allow a volunteer group to operate a formal day labor center there. But many Centreville residents oppose the idea and say the county should take more aggressive steps to remove illegal immigrants -- who opponents say make up the majority of the laborers -- from the community.

So far the controversy has remained a local one, unlike when the town of Herndon made regional and national headlines for its plan to open a day labor center in 2004.

"I am profoundly disappointed in my political representation for not standing up for the people who put them in office," Centreville resident Frederick Peterson said. "The problem is not an employment issue. The problem is illegal aliens in this county costing taxpayers huge amounts of money in services."

The proposed day labor center, on shopping center owner Albert Dwoskin's property, would not receive public funding -- a point of contention in Herndon's debate -- and Dwoskin would rent the trailer and the Centreville Immigration Forum would operate it.

Herndon's day labor center was closed after voters ousted the town council that installed it.

The Centreville Immigration Forum said it does not have an accurate accounting of workers' immigration status. "Some of the workers are documented, some of them are not," said Alice Foltz, convener of the immigration forum.

The group does not intend to check workers' immigration status itself, but would expect employers using the center to obey all state and federal laws, Foltz said. The group would hire two part-time employees to help operate the center on weekday mornings, and it hopes to use volunteers to teach English or offer other types of assistance to the workers, she added.

Dwoskin and Supervisor Michael Frey (R-Sully) said the trailer is a possible solution to a local problem and emphasized they cannot control federal immigration policy.

"I'm not going to claim it's an end-all to any of the situations that we face," Frey said, saying he wants to hear from his constituents about whether a less prominent, more organized area for the day laborers to gather would "make it better than what we have today."

Dwoskin has not indicated how soon he will decide whether to go forward with his plan. He does not need formal approval because an office trailer is an allowed use under the current zoning laws for the shopping center, but is seeking some buy-in from Frey and the Centreville community.

A couple dozen workers now gather regularly near the intersection of St. Germain Drive and Machen Road in Centreville, close to the library and two large shopping centers. The other shopping center is owned by the Rappaport Cos.

Dwoskin is proposing placing the trailer at the southwest corner of his property, off Centrewood Road, between the shopping center and a church. However, he noted he is open to considering other locations.

Gary Malm, owner of Centreville Tire and Auto, said he does not want the proposed trailer to be located next to his business, as Dwoskin has proposed. He is concerned it could encourage vandalism and scare his customers away.

"It is going to be catastrophic to me if this happens," Malm said.

Frey stressed the county is doing all it can to remove illegal immigrants from the community by its participation in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Secure Communities program.

When people are arrested and booked at the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center, their fingerprints are run through an immigration database, as well as criminal databases, and the results are submitted to ICE. Since its inception in March 2009, 150 people have been deported as a result of the county's participation in Secure Communities, Frey said. An additional 650 cases are under federal review.

Del. Timothy Hugo (R-Dist. 40) said recent state legislation he has supported gives the county more authority to stop day labor activities. A bill that goes into effect July 1 adds the sale or attempted sale of services in public roadways as an activity that localities are allowed to regulate.

The proposed trailer would be "a magnet for more problems and traffic and loitering," Hugo said, contending that the county should instead use its new authority to crack down on the behavior.

However, Frey responded the county could enforce the anti-solicitation law only if it also were to do so for team car washes and firefighters conducting their annual "Fill the Boot" campaign. He also noted the state continues to cut funding for local police services, leaving the county's police force stretched too thin to invest a lot of time monitoring day laborers.

"There is a huge problem with the bills that he put forward, and that is resources," Frey said. "We are stretched. We have very few officers as it is today to enforce speeding, to investigate crimes."

Although many speakers at the meeting expressed strong opposition to the proposed worker center, other citizens said after the meeting that they are willing to give the plan a try.

"It's probably better than doing nothing," said Ed Duggan, a resident of Little Rocky Run. "If it doesn't work, [Dwoskin] will drop it in a heartbeat."

Correction: This story was updated to better reflect the role U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Secure Communities program plays in verifying the immigration status of individuals who've been arrested.