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CIF Elects Officers, Applies for Grants

By Bonnie Hobbs

Thursday, October 14, 2010



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If all goes well, a worker center for Centreville's day laborers could open here in a matter of months. So the Centreville Immigration Forum (CIF) is taking the necessary steps to make sure it's ready to run it.

At its Sept. 28 meeting, the group officially adopted bylaws and elected officers and an 11-member board of directors. Alice Foltz — who's been the guiding force of the CIF since its inception, some two-and-a-half years ago, is the president; Barb Shaiko is the secretary and Ed Duggan, treasurer.

"We're in the process of applying for grants so we can hopefully open the center in the winter," said Foltz. "Exactly when we're able to open depends on the grants. We need sufficient staff and money to operate. We know we have a lot of volunteers, but we think it's important that we have a strong, well-organized operation and a trained staff."

The CIF initially began as a way to connect people and organizations that worked with immigrants in Centreville. One of the earliest focuses — which still continues — was providing ESOL classes to teach the laborers English. Then last spring, Al Dwoskin, who owns the Centreville Square Shopping Center, came forward and volunteered to provide a space for a worker center if the CIF would run it.

Currently, workers looking for jobs congregate outside that shopping center, on the outskirts of Centrewood Plaza and near the Centreville Regional Library. But store owners say their presence discourages customers from coming to their businesses.

"So an organized, day-labor site seems to be a good solution for all involved," said Foltz. "Workers would not loiter in the shopping center and library parking lots. Employers would have an organized way to connect with workers. Laborers would have some protection if an employer did not pay them as agreed, or if they were mistreated in any way. With a structure, more homeowners might also be comfortable hiring laborers and more jobs would be created."

The local police support this idea and believe it'll help to have a safe and noncontroversial space where the workers can gather, look for jobs

and receive education. And Foltz considers it "a positive way for our diverse community to respond to change."

The most recent location proposed for the center is on the lower level of the Centreville Square Shopping Center. It would be in a storefront in an area away from most customer traffic, and it's a large-enough size so that all the laborers can be accommodated indoors.

So the CIF has spent the summer getting itself organized for the task ahead. And, said Foltz, "We're on track to become incorporated as a nonprofit." It's also accepting contributions, which will go toward operating the center. Donations payable to Virginia Organizing may be sent to: CIF, Box 81, Centreville, VA 20122.

"We believe this will add to the safety and health of the entire community — workers, store customers and library patrons," said Foltz. "And the center will allow us to provide services for the workers, such as English instruction, skills training, tax and financial education, plus health services — all provided by volunteers."

Two, paid, staff people will be on duty at all times, and there'll also be a director. The grant money will be used for staff salaries and needed materials.

"We applied to some faith-based foundations and other organizations concerned with humanitarian work in the Washington Metropolitan Area," said Foltz. "We've also received some support from individuals and businesses, but we still need more."

For more information or to help, call her at 703-830-4194. Added Foltz: "We're also working on a Web site to provide further information to the community as we get closer to opening."

The next meeting of the CIF is Tuesday, Oct. 26, at 7:30 p.m., at Centreville Presbyterian Church. It's along Route 29 in Centreville, just west of Pleasant Valley Road.



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