

Frank talk on illegal immigrants

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Body

The settlement of thousands of illegal immigrants in metro Atlanta over the last decade has gone from an interesting demographic development to perhaps the most explosive political issue facing our region.

Unfortunately, the public discussion on the issue --- here and elsewhere --- seems dominated by those who want more rights and privileges for "undocumented workers" vs. those who believe millions of "illegal aliens" are depressing wages, subverting American culture and flouting the rule of law. Surely, there is a middle ground to be charted. But it has to start with recognizing that the migration has had a staggering impact on the quality of life in many parts of the metro area.

Near my home in Marietta, I've witnessed more and more men crowd into rundown apartments and decaying rental houses over the last few years. They spend most of their day in the parking lots of liquor stores, convenience stores and vacant lots waiting for work. Meanwhile, I've watched the crime rate rise and the middle-class attendance rate at our neighborhood school plummet.

Now, before you write this off as xenophobia, you need not convince me of the myriad gifts that immigrants can bring to their new communities. I understand they have the capacity to enrich all of us in the same way that my Irish ancestors changed the communities where they "elevated." I also understand the local economy has become dependent on the labor they provide.

I know there are well-intentioned people in Roswell, Norcross and other close-in suburbs where the immigration wave is most prominent who share the same mixed feelings. It's unfair to say these concerns are motivated by racism; that inflammatory accusation has been used far too often to avoid having to face the issue.

No, my frustration stems from a simple fact: There are so many poor immigrants, many of them here illegally, and their basic needs --- education, health care, protection against exploitation --- are so great. In the last years in her third-grade classroom, my wife came to realize that the time she had to devote to poor, immigrant children diminished the time she should have spent with equally needy non-immigrant children.

So I understand completely why Arizonans overwhelmingly passed a largely meaningless measure in November that prohibits state and local officials from providing any more government services to noncitizens. They needed to send a message to their elected leaders to get them to do something.

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There are numerous ideas waiting to be discussed and some positive signs that we may be about to do so. Almost all of the proposals require ***illegal immigrants*** already here to earn legal status; thoughtful proposals also require more public spending to better secure the border.

But the details in these plans are just as important. Who will be eligible for legalization? How would guest workers be matched with their prospective employers? How will the jobs of citizens be protected --- by forcing openings to be offered to Americans first, by some change in the minimum wage law, or some other way?

"Most voters aren't reflexively anti-***immigrant***. They don't necessarily favor a crackdown for a crackdown's sake," says Tamar Jacoby, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and one of the most astute commentators on the issue. "What they want is a solution, not an empty gesture, and many will listen to politicians of either party who can explain the difference and deliver on real reform."

It's time to start listening to the legitimate fears of people who face the issue day in and day out.

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