

Valley Park joins small club with immigration law

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Body

The **law**

The **Valley Park law** on illegal **immigration**:

- * English is the official language of the city.
- * Official city business and communications will be conducted in English.
- * A landlord who rents to illegal immigrants can be fined \$500.
- * A company that hires illegal immigrants will be denied a business permit and cannot get a city contract for five years.

It began, the mayor said, when he was at work.

The mayor, who drives a truck for a local excavation company, was listening to the radio about a month ago and heard a story about a town in Pennsylvania passing a new **law**. It made English the city's official language. It mandated fines for landlords who rent to illegal immigrants. It punished businesses that hire them.

Good idea, Jeffery Whitteaker remembers thinking.

So the mayor asked the **Valley Park** city attorney to draft a similar ordinance. The Board of Aldermen passed it unanimously. There was little debate, Whitteaker said. No one showed up to protest.

And now this **small** city perched on the bank of the Meramec River is one of only a handful of communities across the country to have such a **law** on the books.

Experts on both sides of the **immigration** debate say the local ordinances are among the latest phenomenon in the battle over how to deal with the nation's growing undocumented population.

So far, no **Valley Park** business or landlord has been cited under the new **law**, which passed on July 17.

"The community has been very supportive," Whitteaker said. "If you're legal in **Valley Park** you're fine. . . . If you're illegal, I'd be concerned."

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No, Whitteaker admitted, he couldn't point to specific evidence of what the law claimed -- that illegal immigration increases crime, overcrowds schools and destroys neighborhoods. At least not in Valley Park, a city of 6,500 where illegal immigration is not the widespread problem it is closer to the border.

But Whitteaker didn't want to wait for a problem to pop up. He calls the law "preventative maintenance."

Three other communities -- Hazleton, Pa., Hazle Township, Pa., and Riverside Township in New Jersey -- have passed a version of the law, said John Garcia of the New York-based Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. More than a dozen others are considering it.

"It splits the community," Garcia said. "That's the only thing you get at the end of the day. It gives carte blanche to people who are anti-immigrant and anti-Latino."

Anthony Rothert, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Eastern Missouri, said the law could lead to discrimination, with employers and landlords fearful of dealing with anyone who appears foreign.

A recent legal analysis of the Hazleton ordinance from the Congressional Research Center agreed. And for that very reason, the center said, the law could "give rise to legal challenges."

The St. Charles County Council last month began considering an ordinance with similar traits. Councilman Joe Brazil, a Republican from the Defiance area, wants the county to require companies that arrange jobs for day laborers to keep detailed records on their identities and addresses -- and to check for proof that they can legally work in the United States.

The proposed measure, applying only to unincorporated areas, also would bar companies aiding illegal immigrants from getting a county business license, contract or permit for five years.

Brazil said the measure is part of a national movement "to have local officials take action because federal and state officials aren't doing their jobs."

In Valley Park, residents and workers on Benton Street, home to City Hall, had differing views on the new ordinance.

Jose Mendoza climbed off a roof he and group of Hispanic men were replacing. Beads of sweat formed on his nose. The roofers are all here legally, he said, but that didn't stop him from sympathizing with those who aren't.

"I think it's stupid," Mendoza, whose family hails from Mexico, said of the law. Undocumented workers "work to feed their family. . . . They are hungry."

Norman L. Krupp, a resident on the street, thought the law was needed.

"They come in and they get everything for free," he said.

In fact, he wanted to know why it hadn't been passed sooner -- or why the state or Congress hadn't done something similar.

Jack Setser had another question: What's next? The law, he said, sets a dangerous precedent.

"You can't buy milk unless you have three forms of identification?" he said.

Setser, the operations manager of Ray's Tree Service, called the ordinance "ridiculous." Located just across the street from City Hall, the service employs 30 to 40 workers through a federal migrant workers program and provides them with housing.

"What is the difference between a legal immigrant and illegal immigrant?" He asked. "The only thing is that the illegal immigrant is going to try to keep his nose even cleaner because he has a fear of being deported."

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Lt. Scott Melies, the St. Louis County Police Department's commander of the **Valley Park** detail, isn't sure how he will enforce the ordinance.

"You think an illegal immigrant fills out a census form?" he asked.

He said he had no opinion on the **law**. But he did point out that his department has seen an increase of calls from areas in the city where foreign workers live.

Driving through the city in a police cruiser Thursday, Melies gestured to the cluttered backyard of a migrant workers' residence. There was a trailer full of tree trimmings, an old recliner, an old boat.

"You can see the problem" that attracts complaints, Melies said. "But sometimes, the locals aren't much better."

Graphic

MAP

MAP by Post-Dispatch - **Valley Park**

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