

ANTI-FOREIGNER SENTIMENT WORRIES IMMIGRANTS, EXPERTS; FORUM WILL ADDRESS LAWMAKERS' PLANS TO DEAL WITH ISSUE

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Byline: BYLINE: Julio Ojeda-Zapata, Staff Writer, A community meeting on immigration issues will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. today, at Guadalupe Church, 401 Concord St., on St. Paul's West Side. Spanish and, Hmong translators will be available.

Body

As a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment sweeps through the nation's Capitol, local immigration experts are urging foreign-born Minnesotans to educate themselves about how pending and proposed legislation could affect them and their families.

To jump-start this process, attorneys and immigrant advocates will hold a community forum in St. Paul today to discuss recent developments pertaining to legal immigration.

The meeting is intended for recent arrivals to the United States, but all are welcome, said Pete Rode, research director for the Twin Cities-based Urban Coalition.

"There are proposals in Congress that will hurt legal immigrants," Rode said. "The backers of such proposals are counting on apathy and ignorance to push their proposals through. We want to educate immigrants as well as the general public."

Recent developments that have local immigrant advocates so concerned include:

Proposed House legislation that would cut legal immigration by 30 percent. The proposal would set an annual ceiling of 330,000 family-sponsored immigrants and eliminate visa eligibility for brothers, sisters and adult children of citizens.

A proposal by a Senate immigration subcommittee to deny public benefits to illegal residents.

Recommendations of a bipartisan commission that would sharply trim legal immigration. For instance, the allotment of visas for reuniting the families of citizens and legal immigrants would be cut by one-fifth.

Immigration advocates see these and other trends as part of an "anti-immigrant hysteria" in the halls of government.

Longtime efforts to crack down on illegal immigrants now are being expanded to include legal immigrants amid continuing economic troubles in the United States, said state Rep. Carlos Mariani, who represents St. Paul's heavily Hispanic West Side.

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"These proposals are driven by politicians who are looking to advance themselves with issues that prey on people's fears," Mariani said. "Their proposals imply that the country is going to ruin because of a bunch of immigrants."

Such attitudes are increasingly prevalent in places like California but are less widespread in Minnesota, where only about 113,000 residents are foreign-born, Rode said.

Still, immigration issues are important to Southeast-Asian immigrants who yearn to be reunited with relatives who are still abroad, and to many Hispanic residents on the West Side and elsewhere who have strong ties to Mexico.

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