

## **Herndon Postpones Day-Labor Decision; Deluge of Speakers Prompts Delay**

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### **Body**

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Concerns about property values, illegal immigration and human rights collided last night in **Herndon** as passionate advocates for and against a tax-supported site for day laborers lined up in an effort to sway the Town Council.

Nearly 150 people who had signed up to speak crowded into the town's small municipal building for the fourth night of public hearings this summer, as the council considered how to resolve problems created by scores of immigrants congregating outside a 7-Eleven to seek construction work.

The number of **speakers**, each allotted three minutes, **prompted** the council to **postpone** a vote on the issue, which has overwhelmed the town with publicity.

As people waited to take their seats in the cramped council chambers, zoning officials covered the often-dry details of the proposal from a local social service agency to set up an organized gathering spot for day laborers that would replace the current unofficial site.

But outside the chambers, the battle lines were evident between advocates and opponents of a publicly funded site. Supporters stood on one side of the street, carrying signs that read "Ignorance Breeds Fear," referring to anti-immigrant sentiment. A crowd gathered on the other side wearing, on their shirts, white paper stars with a slash through the phrase "**Day Labor** Site." One sign stated: "Start a Revolution and Hire an American."

Inside, the **speakers'** concerns ranged from human rights to property rights and whether the mission of local government should include enforcement of what many called the failure of federal authorities to police the country's borders.

"Do we want to live in a town full of prejudice, where people like me are not welcome because we have an accent?" asked Ana Rochac, an immigrant from El Salvador who owns a travel agency in town.

Other **speakers** expressed concern that the value of homes near the 7-Eleven has declined because of the day laborers.

The prospect of spending taxpayer money on a day-laborers' site has polarized **Herndon**, a Fairfax County town of 22,000 near Dulles International Airport.

## Herndon Postpones Day-Labor Decision; Deluge of Speakers Prompts Delay

With a supply of inexpensive housing and a robust demand for construction workers in Northern Virginia's booming economy, the town has drawn many newcomers from Mexico and Central America. They began gathering in the parking lot to wait for work from contractors.

Town officials -- responding to homeowners who complained about noise, littering and an intimidating presence of up to 150 men every morning -- considered a proposal from Project Hope and Harmony to establish a day-laborer hiring center on the site of a vacated police station abutting a residential neighborhood on the Loudoun County border.

But tensions over using \$175,000 in public money to help fund the center exploded this summer at several public hearings.

The town appears evenly split between those who say a publicly supported center would be tantamount to endorsing illegal immigration and those who simply want officials to deal with the situation at the 7-Eleven, which they see as a nuisance.

Advocates for the day laborers say it is not their job to enforce immigration law. They say the workers are helping the local economy by taking low-paying jobs that U.S.-born workers do not want.

The Planning Commission narrowly rejected the proposal at its early August meeting, but the vote was not binding. The Town Council appeared divided before last night's hearing, with Mayor Michael L. O'Reilly in favor of the site and Ann V. Null, a member who has actively fought efforts to support undocumented workers, opposed.

What began as a local battle moved to the national stage in recent weeks as part of the larger debate about illegal immigration. WMAL-AM radio broadcast more than a dozen shows on Herndon, including a call-in program with a Sacramento-based guest host 10 days ago that prompted so many calls to the Herndon Municipal Center that the town manager shut the switchboard for four days.

Television networks have featured segments on the debate, and national anti-immigration groups have made contact with local opponents of the worker center. Judicial Watch, a self-styled anti-corruption group, has threatened to sue the town if it spends public money on the site.

Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton told the council last night that "support for this site is not an option" and compared the neighborhood around the 7-Eleven to a red-light district.

Other speakers challenged Herndon to treat all its residents with equal respect.

"Don't allow this issue to be decided by false facts, half-truths and unfounded fears," said town resident Bill Perry. "If you build a community on hate, you will hate the community you build."

Elsewhere in the region, Arlington has set up a gathering spot for day laborers in Shirlington, and Montgomery County recently approved an employment center based in Wheaton that will run several sites through a nonprofit group.

Herndon, a former dairy farm community less than 20 miles from Washington, counts foreign-born residents as 38 percent of its population, according to the 2000 Census. The proportion of white residents dropped in the 1990s to 58 percent from 78 percent.

"There's an us-against-them feeling that is full-blown in Herndon right now," said Jose Vanegas of Sterling, an immigrant from Colombia who has worked with the day laborers. "People feel you're either for them or against them."

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