

TEXAS TOWN PASSES ORDINANCE TO CONDUCT ALL CITY MEETINGS IN SPANISH;

IT ALSO PROHIBITS CITY WORKERS FROM TURNING IN ILLEGAL ALIENS

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Body

Habla espanol?

If not, you might walk into an El Cenizo city meeting and wonder what side of the Rio Grande you're on.

Two weeks ago, the town's commissioners passed an ordinance declaring that all city meetings and functions would be held in Spanish. Ordinances and resolutions still will be written in English, but the city will translate them into Spanish upon request. The commissioners also passed a measure forbidding city employees to turn in illegal immigrants.

El Cenizo is believed to be the only U.S. city with an all-Spanish policy. English translations of meetings are available but must be requested 48 hours in advance.

"It's not because we don't speak English," said City Commissioner Flora Barton. "It's because we're doing it for those that speak only Spanish, and we want everybody to be comfortable and to understand and to be aware of what's going on here in El Cenizo."

El Cenizo is a largely blue-collar town of 7,800 about 10 miles outside Laredo. Its main streets are paved, but dirt roads also run through the city. Well-kept, modest houses exist side by side with ramshackle homes and buildings. For years, the city had no garbage or ambulance service.

Barton estimates that more than 90 percent of El Cenizo's residents speak Spanish, though many are bilingual. A few people, particularly younger ones, speak only English.

For several years, meetings have been bilingual, since residents routinely asked commissioners to explain things in Spanish, she said. But some Spanish-speakers wouldn't attend city meetings because of the language barrier and were surprised by the commissioners' decision.

The most recent City Council meeting, on Aug. 12, was conducted in Spanish after passage of the measure. English First, a Virginia-based organization working to make English the official language of the country and to undo bilingual education, opposed the city's actions.

"El Cenizo is the canary in the mine," English First's executive director, Jim Boulet Jr., said Thursday.

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"I think this is a wake-up call to this country, where in a land where 328 different languages are spoken, that we either are going to speak in one language in this nation of immigrants or we are going to be speaking in many."

In addition to the language measure, El Cenizo passed a Safe Haven Ordinance, forbidding city employees and officials to ask residents whether they are legal immigrants or citizens or to help an agency like the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service find illegal immigrants. City employees who violate the ordinance can be fired.

Barton said the city still would cooperate with the Border Patrol on other matters, such as stopping drug smuggling.

She said the ordinance was not aimed at making El Cenizo a haven for illegal immigrants. She said residents simply resented constantly having to prove their status to the Border Patrol.

A federal Immigration agency spokesman, Tomas Zuniga, warned: "If there comes a time when we come into conflict with the city ordinances, we would pursue the matter at that time. I don't foresee it going that far, but the extreme level would be where we take action through legal means."

Jessika Silva, director of the El Cenizo Community Center, said the Spanish-language ordinance reflected a reality for many people in El Cenizo: "They have to work hard all day so they don't have time to learn English."

But Virginia Salazar, an El Cenizo resident who teaches nutrition at a community clinic, believes the ordinance is wrong-headed.

"We want our children to get educated," she said. "We want them to have better jobs, to progress. It looks like we're going backward instead of progressing."

Graphic

PHOTO THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Photo - City Commissioner Flora Barton explains that El Cenizo, Texas, wants "everybody to be comfortable" when they attend council meetings. Most people in town speak Spanish.

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