

L.I. Community Focus of Debate On Immigrants

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Body

Mexico's consul general for the New York region said on Friday that the Long Island **community** of Farmingville had become a national flash point on immigration issues because of the latest conflict over day laborers evicted from overcrowded houses cited as unsafe.

The consul general, Arturo C. Sarukhan, criticized local officials at a news conference here on Friday, saying they should help relocate the displaced tenants and soothe local tensions.

"I would say that Farmingville, except for the Arizona border, seems to be a unique flashpoint or red flag on the map," Mr. Sarukhan said in a separate interview. "Farmingville has become a symbol of how we need to solve the profound dislocations that have been occurring" in immigration.

The Suffolk County executive, Steve Levy, may have been ill-advised on Farmingville, Mr. Sarukhan said, urging him "to rethink his position" and heal local rifts. Mr. Sarukhan said he would seek "a face-to-face meeting" with Mr. Levy next week.

Mr. Levy replied in an interview that he had already met the consul general and knew his views. "If it's possible to fit him in, we'll see what we can do," Mr. Levy said about another meeting. "But," he added pointedly, "I don't need a lecture."

Mr. Levy also found himself at odds with nine members of his own Hispanic Advisory Board, who complained he had ignored them and quit in protest. Newsday reported the resignations on Friday.

But Mr. Levy, a Democrat who took office last year, said he had met with the board more often than his Republican predecessor did in 12 years, and described most of those who quit as disgruntled Republican holdovers.

In vitriolic volleys in the past three weeks, critics called Mr. Levy "racist" and accused him of "ethnic cleansing" in Farmingville, while he retorted that the critics were "extremists" and the "lunatic fringe."

Farmingville has been torn for several years as thousands of Mexicans, many of them illegal aliens, flooded into its mostly white working-class neighborhoods. Longtime residents often complain about throngs of men congregating on sidewalks, waiting to be hired for the day, and about blight they say is caused by overcrowded flophouses. Advocates for the Mexicans say most are hard-working and fill a demand for low-paid manual labor.

The tensions have prompted protest marches on both sides, and even violence. In 2000, assailants pretended to hire two laborers, then beat them nearly to death. In 2003, a house was set afire by teenagers, and the Mexican family sleeping inside barely escaped.

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Emotions boiled over anew last month as the Suffolk police assisted Brookhaven Town officials in arresting a landlord and closing a 900-square-foot single-family house for safety violations. Inspectors said that they found 44 beds and that up to 64 men had stayed there.

Neighbors hailed the crackdown as overdue. Town officials said they were investigating other overcrowded houses in Farmingville, more than 150 at last count, and estimated that there were 300 more such house in other parts of Brookhaven Town.

But advocates for the ***immigrants*** object that they had no warning and were forced into homelessness. Mr. Levy said that the county social service agency would help those who were eligible, but that illegal aliens did not qualify, and that nonprofit agencies would be enlisted to find them temporary quarters.

Mr. Sarukhan said he was not questioning the county executive's "decision or authority to enforce those fire codes." But he faulted Mr. Levy for not meeting with representatives of the Mexicans, and for failing to use "the bully pulpit" of his office to heal Farmingville's wounds.

"The day laborers are not criminals," he said. "They are law-abiding. They are hard-working, and most are taxpayers." He urged a broad discussion among the two governments and local officials, including issues of gangs and international trade.

The county's role has been "totally exaggerated," Mr. Levy said, because the town is responsible for code enforcement. But he wholeheartedly supports it, to rescue tenants from dangerous conditions and protect neighborhoods from slumlords.

Mr. Levy said that the consul general "would have been more productive if he had announced he was giving money to the county to help residents from Mexico who are here illegally." He also urged that Mexico improve its economy so its citizens will not be lured across the border.

"The constituents are overwhelmingly behind me in our effort to enforce the law," Mr. Levy said. The issue has generated hundreds of calls and letters, which he said run nine to one in support. "Just today I finished taping a television show and a woman from Farmingville came up and kissed me and thanked me for standing tough."

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