

Herndon To Keep Day-Labor Center; Council Wants New Manager

The Washington Post

August 16, 2007 Thursday, Met 2 Edition

Copyright 2007 The Washington Post All Rights Reserved



Distribution: Maryland

Section: METRO; Pg. B01

Length: 634 words

Byline: Sandhya Somashekhar

Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

The **Herndon** Town **Council** voted last night to **keep** open its two-year-old hiring **center** for day laborers but to find a **new manager** who will ban illegal immigrants.

Officials say they have an operator in mind, but previous searches have come up empty. Supporters of the **center** say the dozens of men who use it to find jobs -- many of whom are thought to be illegal immigrants -- might end up back on the streets.

The vote ended the uncertainty over whether Project Hope and Harmony, the faith-based nonprofit that runs the site, will be allowed to continue in that role permanently.

"It will be a big disappointment for us and the workers" when Hope and Harmony leaves, said Bill Threlkeld, director of the group, which is affiliated with Reston Interfaith. The group will consider remaining until a **new manager** is found but will continue its practice of not checking immigration status.

Council member William B. Tirrell Sr. said "the rule of law" took priority over workers' needs. "The law is the law is the law," he said. "We can't decide by whimsy what laws you're going to enforce."

Meanwhile, the **day-labor** issue was the subject of a heated meeting in Northeast Washington last night. Many people told D.C. **Council** member Harry Thomas Jr. (D-Ward 5) that they opposed his plan to set up a multicultural training **center** in a shopping **center** off Rhode Island Avenue NE.

Speakers said the **center** would serve undocumented workers who take jobs that could be filled by community residents.

"This project represents misplaced priorities," said community activist Kathy Henderson.

Herndon To Keep Day-Labor Center; Council Wants New Manager

The Herndon Official Workers Center has been controversial since it opened in December 2005 in response to what many residents said was a public nuisance -- dozens of mostly Hispanic day laborers who gathered on Herndon's main thoroughfare to flag down prospective employers.

It was approved by the Town Council and funded in part with a \$175,000-a-year grant from Fairfax County. It was unclear last night whether county funds would still be available.

Six months after it opened, voters elected a new mayor and two new council members who opposed the center, which many residents said had become a taxpayer-funded haven for illegal immigrants. Since then, the center has become a focus of the immigration debate.

The problem, critics said, was the failure to check whether the roughly 120 workers who go there on weekdays are authorized to work and live in the country. Project Hope and Harmony has said that its role is to connect workers with employers, not to check workers' status.

Dozens of speakers addressed the council Monday and yesterday. Some residents -- many of them members of Help Save Herndon, a group against illegal immigration -- urged closing the center, which they said has reduced property values and attracted illegal immigrants.

At the very least, they said, Project Hope and Harmony and Reston Interfaith should be ousted. For the manager's job, town officials are considering a former teacher who has said he will check work authorization papers and try to serve a broader group of clients.

"Breaking the law in the name of charity is simply unacceptable," said Susan Powell, a resident.

Many speakers, including several affiliated with Reston Interfaith, called the center a resounding success that should continue as is. They had photos of empty parking lots where workers once collected and said the center taught subjects that helped workers assimilate.

Lisa Merkel, 34, of Herndon voiced discomfort about spending tax funds to give jobs to undocumented workers. But she said the center has served its purpose well.

"Some illegal immigrants are getting work," she said, "but the day-labor mess we had a few years ago is not a problem anymore."

Staff writers Martin Weil and Yolanda Woodlee contributed to this report.

Graphic

IMAGE; By Sarah L. Voisin -- The Washington Post; Town Council members Dennis D. Husch, left, and William B. Tirrell Sr. talk after the hearing on the future of Herndon's day-labor center.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); CITY GOVERNMENT (89%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (89%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (89%); CITIES (78%); MUNICIPAL FINANCE (78%);

Herndon To Keep Day-Labor Center; Council Wants New Manager

COUNTIES (78%); MAYORS (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); RECRUITMENT & HIRING (78%); COMMUNITY ACTIVISM (77%); IMMIGRATION LAW (77%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (75%); APPROVALS (72%); RULE OF LAW (72%); RELIGION (70%); NUISANCE (66%); GRANTS & GIFTS (60%)

Organization: PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE HEALTH FOUNDATION (57%)

Geographic: DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: August 16, 2007

End of Document