

Lawmakers hear Americans' voices on immigration; Hearings held on both coasts to discuss bills

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Body

SAN DIEGO -- Congressional Republicans **heard** lively testimony Wednesday from mayors, sheriffs and ordinary citizens in two public **hearings held** on **both coasts** to **discuss** illegal **immigration**.

The **hearings** in San Diego and Philadelphia marked the opening of a summer season that will take proponents of competing **immigration** proposals in Congress across the country. The aim is to demonstrate public support for their plans.

The House **bill** focuses on enforcing the border and cracking down on companies that hire illegal immigrants.

The House version does not include the proposal of the Senate **bill** to create a path to citizenship for most of the estimated 12 million people living here illegally.

In Washington, President Bush appeared at a donut shop in Virginia owned by an Iranian immigrant to reaffirm his call for a **bill** that allows some of those here illegally to qualify eventually for citizenship. Although he called for more border security, Bush said, "We're not going to be able to deport people who've been here working hard and raising their families."

On the West **Coast**, much of the talk was about how hard it is to handle the stream of Mexican citizens coming across the border.

Rep. Ed Royce, R-Calif., chairman of the subcommittee on international terrorism, said that if Congress approved the House-passed **bill**, it would establish "operational control of our border."

"It is elementary: To defend ourselves, we must secure our borders," Royce said.

Law enforcement officials testified that a large number of criminals were slipping across the border.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca said 27% of the inmates in his jails are illegal immigrants. Rick Flores, sheriff of Webb County, Texas, says his department duels with drug cartels and smuggling operations across the border in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

"We need your help," he said. "The Mexico government is in on the narco-smuggling."

Darryl Griffen, chief of the San Diego sector of the U.S. Border Patrol, said he needs not just more officers but better technology to stop illegal entrants.

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He said electronic monitoring equipment that assists officers covers 9 miles of the 60 miles of border for which he is responsible.

"They're turning our country into their country," said Dan Colandria, 34, of Vista, Calif.

Colandria said he is a member of the Minutemen, a volunteer group that patrols the border with Mexico and calls authorities when people are spotted trying to sneak across.

"It's just not right," he said.

Democrats mocked the Republicans for holding hearings they said would not lead to solutions.

"These hearings are not designed to legislate -- they are designed to whip up public opinion," said Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Calif.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a Republican, urged lawmakers to find a way to let illegal immigrants remain in the country. He told the panel in Philadelphia that New York City is home to more than 3 million immigrants and a half-million of them came here illegally.

"Although they broke the law by illegally crossing our borders ... our city's economy would be a shell of itself had they not, and it would collapse if they were deported," he said. "The same holds true for the nation."

Philadelphia Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson and representatives of Pennsylvania's dairy, landscaping and hospitality industries testified in favor of giving illegal immigrants a chance at citizenship.

Louis Barletta, the Republican mayor of Hazleton, a northeast Pennsylvania town of 22,000 people, said his city has been "terrorized" by illegal immigrant drug dealers and murderers.

He said he is pushing an ordinance that will impose tough penalties on employers who hire illegal immigrants.

"I have had enough," Barletta said. "This ordinance is intended to make Hazleton one of the most difficult places in the United States for illegal immigrants."

Kiely reported from Philadelphia

Graphic

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