

Facing a Court Hearing, Man Begins Removing Pro-Immigrant Billboard

The Washington Post

September 5, 2008 Friday, Met 2 Edition

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Distribution: Maryland

Section: METRO; Pg. B05

Length: 495 words

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Body

With sledgehammers, shovels and a brief ceremony, the owner of a **pro-immigrant billboard** in Old Town Manassas **began removing** his 12-by-40-foot sign last night, before a **court hearing** scheduled today with city officials in Prince William County General District **Court**.

Gaudencio Fernandez, a Manassas contractor who moved to the United States from Mexico in 1979, built the sign more than a year ago to protest what he called "racist" policies that target illegal **immigrants** in Manassas and Prince William County.

Painted in crude red and blue letters and posted in view of commuters at the adjacent train station, it stirred controversy and became a flash point in the area's debate over illegal immigration.

Fernandez, 48, declined to speak at length with reporters last night, citing the **court** appearance. "We can't make any statement at this point," he said, looking emotional while posing for pictures in front of the sign with his wife and children.

Several of Fernandez's friends and supporters who gathered last night at the sign said they were there to help him **remove** it.

"We came to help give him a hand taking it down and to support him," said Barry Carter, a friend of Fernandez's who drove up from Buffalo Junction, near the North Carolina border.

Fernandez's backers have treated the **billboard** as an icon, calling it "the liberty wall" because of its location at 9500 Liberty St., and have said the city has pressured Fernandez in an effort to silence his political views. To the sign's detractors, many of whom said they were offended by the evocations of slavery and genocide in Fernandez's messages, the sign was an eyesore.

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City zoning inspectors have taken a more technical view of the property, where a house bought in 2003 by Fernandez and his wife, Delia Alvarez, was mostly destroyed in a fire in 2006. As the structure was being demolished, Fernandez left one wall intact and reinforced the base to create the **billboard**.

Manassas officials have repeatedly cited him for failing to obtain a proper permit for the sign. **Billboards** don't belong in neighborhoods zoned for residential use, they said. They have also accused him of allowing trash, snakes and rodents to accumulate at the site; for parking cars on the grass; and for allowing sympathizers to use the lot as a campsite.

"One of the things we hold dear in this country is freedom of speech," said Mayor Harry J. "Hal" Parrish II (R). "He's had a great opportunity to take advantage of that freedom. But I suspect not many people living in Manassas or anywhere in America would look at a big **billboard** next to their home as a positive thing, regardless of what it said."

Even with the sign **removed**, Fernandez's attorney, Mark Voss, said his client and Alvarez will have to appear in **court** today. Voss said he expects the city attorney will ask to delay the case for a week to see whether the property gets cleaned up. At that point, he said, he would expect the case against Fernandez to be dropped.

Graphic

IMAGE; By Richard A. Lipski -- The Washington Post; Supporters of Gaudencio Fernandez help to dismantle the sign he made more than a year ago to protest what he called "racist" policies against illegal **immigrants**. Manassas officials have cited him for failing to obtain a permit.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); ILLEGAL **IMMIGRANTS** (90%); CITY GOVERNMENT (89%); ZONING (89%); HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS (89%); CITIES (78%); RACISM & XENOPHOBIA (78%); LAW **COURTS** & TRIBUNALS (77%); FREEDOM OF SPEECH (77%); ETHNIC CONFLICTS (71%); COMMUTING (70%); LAND USE PLANNING (69%)

Industry: ZONING (89%); RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY (78%); OUTDOOR ADVERTISING (73%); LAND USE PLANNING (69%)

Geographic: NORTH CAROLINA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (92%); MEXICO (79%)

Load-Date: September 5, 2008