

## **Immigrant Proposal Divides Frederick; Official Suggests Denying Services**

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### **Body**

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The **immigrant** community in **Frederick** County grew quickly and quietly in the first half of this decade. Priced out of such places as Adams Morgan, Silver Spring and Manassas, many Latinos migrated up Interstate 270, drawn by **Frederick**'s booming construction and retail **service** industries.

Longtime residents of the once-sleepy exurb began to notice: Latin groceries cropped up on the so-called Golden Mile of shopping. The school system budget for language interpreters grew by \$1 million in two years. And this spring, a spotlight turned on a **Frederick immigrant** enclave when a Salvadoran man and his four children were found dead in their townhouse.

But still, people kept quiet -- until a county commissioner **suggested** in August that **Frederick deny** public **services**, including schooling, to **immigrants** in the United States illegally. Commissioner Charles A. Jenkins's **proposal** to follow the lead of Prince William and Loudoun counties in targeting illegal **immigrants** sparked a firestorm in **Frederick**, whose foreign-born population has nearly tripled this decade and is the fastest-growing in Maryland.

As the county board prepares to vote tomorrow whether to advance Jenkins's **proposal** to the state legislature, **Frederick** is a community deeply **divided**.

Racial tensions are flaring, and fear has taken hold among **immigrants**, some of whom say they feel this county 40 miles north of Washington is trying to push them out. Residents are speaking out, and loudly.

A public forum on the issue last week stretched past midnight with dozens saying the **proposal** is an unconstitutional violation of civil rights. Further, opponents say, immigration policy is the province of Congress, not county commissioners.

Jenkins and his backers say illegal **immigrants** are sucking up public dollars, especially in the schools, where the cost to teach English has soared. "My **proposal** was that if you're going to avail yourself of benefits that are

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provided by taxpayer dollars that you at least demonstrate that you belong in this country legally," said Jenkins, a Republican.

Immigration, particularly the debate on how to address those who are in the county illegally, has suffused the Washington region.

In July, county supervisors in Prince William and Loudoun approved resolutions to deny certain public services to illegal immigrants, but they have run into legal and financial barriers. In Anne Arundel, County Executive John R. Leopold (R) issued an executive order in August banning businesses with county contracts from employing workers in the country illegally.

But Frederick's government charter does not give its county board the power to take such action. The five county commissioners can vote only to recommend that the county's state senators and delegates introduce Jenkins's proposal as a bill in the 2008 state General Assembly.

It is uncertain whether the proposal will win support from a majority of the commissioners. If it does, the bill will stand little chance before the state's liberal legislature. Even Jenkins acknowledges this much.

"I don't think it will even make it to Annapolis," he said.

And so the proposal is more a symbolic statement -- a fractious one.

"For a proposal like this to cut at the heart and bring tension, it's just a divisive proposal that will turn back all of the hard work that has been done to bring our community together," said Guy Djoken, president of the local NAACP chapter.

Salvadoran native Rosi Arriaza, who rings up customers at the A-International Market on West Patrick Street in the west end of town where many immigrants are settling, agreed.

"People here are scared," Arriaza said under the chatter of a telenovela. Two weeks ago, when police pulled into the parking lot, she recalled telling customers: "Go home. Don't stay here. It's dangerous."

"People are scared that the government will send them home," she said.

"I've been here 20-something years, and I've never seen something like this before," said Oscar Lazo, who also emigrated from El Salvador and runs a Mexican restaurant a few doors down. "It's like we are being chased out."

"We just came here to work hard and improve the economy of this county," Lazo added. "We are not coming here to create problems for the county."

In 2000, Frederick County had about 7,800 foreign-born residents. By last year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, that number had soared to more than 19,000 -- an estimate some community leaders call conservative.

"If indeed there was a homogeneity 15 years ago, today there's much more diversity," said the Rev. John Deckenback, who opposes Jenkins's proposal. "Some people reminisce that they want to roll the clock back to being a Sleepy Hollow, being a nice little village on the edge of the D.C. metropolitan area."

The influx of immigrants has hit a nerve. One resident wrote in an e-mail to the commissioners, "Is Frederick County a 'Sanctuary County' for illegal aliens? In my observation, illegal aliens are operating with impunity here."

Another wrote, "It's about time. Finally someone is taking serious, tangible action."

Jenkins said he was persuaded to introduce his proposal after a series of summer budget meetings in which county officials said they needed more money for interpreters who speak Spanish. The school system asked for \$2.9 million for interpreters, up from \$2.2 million the year before.

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There are about 1,200 English-language learners in the school system, about 800 of whom speak Spanish as their primary language, according to school data.

"It came to me: Do we ever ask for citizenship status for people who are availing themselves of these public benefits?" Jenkins said. "The answer to that was, 'No, we don't.' "

Commissioners President Jan H. Gardner (D) has been one of Jenkins's most vocal critics. "On the surface, when he says people who aren't paying in should be denied services, there's some logic there," she said. "But when you look into it, it falls apart."

"I think there is a tremendous amount of concern about illegal immigration out there. Everybody is passionate about it," Gardner said. "The question to us is, do we have a role in addressing it?"

The short answer, she said, is no. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1984 that states cannot deny illegal-immigrant children access to public education.

"I think it's wrong for elected officials to propose a solution to a real or perceived problem by breaking the law," Gardner said. "It leads to anarchy."

Jenkins said he's willing to use Frederick as a test case and take it to the nation's high court. But doing so could cost millions in legal fees.

Ultimately, what Jenkins's proposal has accomplished is that community leaders are talking about the demographic changes in Frederick.

"We need to embrace it and discuss it as opposed to sweep it under the rug and hope it goes away," said Del. Richard B. Weldon Jr. (R), chairman of the Frederick delegation. "It isn't going to go away."

## Graphic

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IMAGE; By Susan Biddle -- The Washington Post; Guy Djoken, president of the Frederick County NAACP chapter, briefs a group opposed to the proposal on a meeting he had with the commissioners.

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