

Community will keep up campaign against illegals VETO OVERRIDE FAILS Two aldermen change votes, dooming effort to save less strict ordinance.

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Byline: By Stephen Deere ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Body

VALLEY PARK - Valley Park will continue to enforce an ordinance targeting illegal immigrants despite a costly legal battle and a recent decision by aldermen to do just the opposite.

Two weeks ago, aldermen voted 7-1 to delete parts of the housing code that would deny occupancy permits to landlords renting to illegal aliens. On Friday, Mayor Jeffery Whitteaker vetoed the board's decision.

The board needed six votes to override Whitteaker's veto Monday night, but only five of its eight members voted to do so. Aldermen Steve Drake and Mike White reversed themselves. They said last week that their earlier votes to stop combating illegal immigrants were premature.

Whitteaker said he had vetoed the changes because, "to repeal what we have worked so hard to create would be a much larger waste of money than to see this issue forward."

Whitteaker also said other communities were counting on Valley Park for guidance in how to deal with illegal immigration. At Monday's meeting, Whitteaker noted how a student from O'Fallon, Mo., was killed on spring break in Florida when he was hit by a car driven by a suspected illegal immigrant.

"If I and this board prevent one person from being killed, then I don't care what it costs," he said.

About 50 people showed up at Monday night's meeting to debate the issue. Frank Rice of Union handed the board a \$500 check to help pay for the city's legal costs.

"Our federal government now stands impotent to enforce its laws," Rice said. He urged the board to continue efforts to battle illegal immigration.

"May God bless this great nation and this fine city," he said.

Kim Gardner, a real estate developer and Sunset Hills attorney, said he knew of several attorneys who agreed with Valley Park's stance and said he wanted to offer his legal services to the city for free.

Several Valley Park residents said they were worried about the cost of fighting a lawsuit.

"All we are doing is dividing our city, and we are sending a lot of attorneys to Disneyland on the city's dime," said resident Mary Fehner.

In July, Whitteaker made national news by championing an ordinance imposing fines of \$500 on businesses and landlords that hire or rent to illegal aliens. The board voted unanimously for that ordinance.

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A coalition of about 20 attorneys sued the city, arguing that the law promoted racial profiling, hurt businesses and caused housing discrimination. Last month, a St. Louis County Circuit Court judge ruled that the city's original attempts at the ordinance contradicted state law.

The judge's ruling did not apply to a revised housing ordinance the city enacted earlier this year. The ordinance would prevent landlords from getting occupancy permits if they rent to illegal aliens.

The ACLU of Eastern Missouri filed another suit over that law a few days after the judge's ruling. That ordinance is the one the Board of Aldermen tried to alter.

The city's legal fees in the case have run about \$80,000 so far. Valley Park has received roughly \$8,000 in donations from people like Rice to offset the costs.

After Monday's meeting, Philip Soto, a resident, stood outside City Hall shaking his head.

"People have lost common sense," Soto said. "They've lost the ability to step back from the precipice. ... I'm sorry, but you cannot convince me that there isn't some racial overtone."

Notes

VALLEY PARK

Graphic

PHOTO - At a meeting Monday of the Valley Park Board of Aldermen, William Reynolds speaks against an ordinance denying occupancy permits for rentals to illegal aliens. Odell Mitchell Jr. | Post-Dispatch

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