

Pr. William Has Raucous Forum on Laborers - Correction Appended

The Washington Post

November 21, 2004 Sunday, Final Edition

 **Correction Appended**

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The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: Metro; C01

Length: 716 words

Byline: Jacqueline L. Salmon, Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

The clash between Latino immigrants who wait outside for day jobs and suburban residents who accuse them of loitering heated up yesterday at a town hall meeting and protest march in Woodbridge.

More than 100 people showed up for the often-tumultuous meeting. Waving signs and occasionally erupting into shouts and catcalls, participants barraged public officials with questions and comments and argued with each other over what to do about day laborers who have been gathering at a Woodbridge 7-Eleven while waiting for contractors to pick them up.

Last month, Prince William County police arrested 24 laborers at the site and charged them with loitering. On Monday, three more laborers were charged. Eleven of the men have been turned over to federal immigration authorities and face possible deportation.

Latino leaders have criticized the arrests as an excuse to harass immigrants and deport them. After yesterday's meeting, about 75 day laborers and supporters marched from a church to a Mexican restaurant next to the 7-Eleven to protest the arrests.

The town hall meeting was organized by Supervisor Hilda M. Barg (D-Woodbridge), who is pushing for a permanent job assistance center where day laborers could gather.

Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.) told the crowd that Prince William -- where the percentage of Latinos has climbed from 9 percent to 16 percent in the past four years -- is not alone in dealing with this issue. Other parts of Northern Virginia have also struggled with it, Davis said, as have communities across the country.

"This has national ramifications," said Davis, whose district, aides noted, is 30 percent immigrant.

Some participants criticized the day laborers in personal terms, saying that most were illegal and urging Prince William police to continue to arrest them and turn them over to immigration authorities.

"If they are illegal, take them away," said Michael Crowe of Springfield, a member of the Virginia Coalition Against Terrorism. "Enforce the law. That's why I pay my taxes."

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Others questioned why the workers needed special services when temporary employment agencies and the state unemployment office were available nearby.

"I don't understand why community resources have to go to accommodate day laborers," April Gallop, 33, a Woodbridge resident, said to applause.

But others spoke in the workers' defense.

"I've found them to be entirely, in my experience, polite, hardworking people," said Bruce Smith, 60, who said day laborers live in his neighborhood less than a mile from the 7-Eleven. "They have been as good as neighbors as anybody in the neighborhood."

Alice Gardiner, a resident of Occoquan, compared the day laborers to commuters waiting in HOV slug lines at commuter lots that dot the county. "What are those people doing? Loitering," she said.

About a dozen day laborers sat silently throughout most of the meeting, listening to a Spanish translation on headphones. A representative of several Latino groups spoke on their behalf.

"The fact that these folks are willing to stand on the street corner for a job is honorable," said Julian Bermudez, chief executive of Hispanic Outreach Leadership Action. "These folks are not terrorists, they're not mass murderers. . . . They just want to pursue the American dream."

But J. Haga, 45, a Woodbridge resident who lives near the 7-Eleven, had a more prosaic concern.

"It's okay that there are day laborers and stuff, but are they accountable for paying taxes?" she asked in an interview. "Are they accountable for paying into the medical system? . . . They have to be accountable for that."

Barg said she plans to organize a community task force to study the issue and recommend solutions.

"I feel good about this meeting," she said. "People had to vent."

March organizer Ricardo Juarez said authorities are using the loitering charges as an excuse to arrest and deport laborers. He said his group, the Workers Committee of Woodbridge, plans to file suit challenging the constitutionality of the loitering statute.

Laborer German Silva Guzman, 21, said some of the people at the meeting treated the men as if they were terrorists. "This is unfortunate," he said through an interpreter. All the day laborers want "is a better life for their families and themselves."

Correction

A Nov. 21 Metro article on a town hall meeting in Woodbridge about day laborers incorrectly attributed a comment to Occoquan resident Alice Gardiner. Another speaker made the comment; Gardiner did not speak at the meeting.

Correction-Date: November 23, 2004

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

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Subject: PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (90%); IMMIGRATION (90%); TALKS & MEETINGS (90%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (90%); LOITERING & VAGRANCY (90%); ARRESTS (90%); PUBLIC HEARINGS (90%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); DEPORTATION (78%); EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (78%); COMMUTING (78%); POLICE FORCES (76%); TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT (73%); EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES (73%); SUBURBS (73%); TERRORISM (50%)

Company: 7-ELEVEN INC (57%)

Industry: EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (78%); EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES (73%)

Person: TOM DAVIS (69%)

Geographic: VIRGINIA, USA (93%)

Load-Date: November 21, 2004

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