

## **Minutemen march far from border**

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### **Body**

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As usual, the message board outside Mulligan's tavern vented illegal immigration frustrations at motorists traveling Roswell Road.

"**Border** Patrol eat free," the sign read. "Don't forget to pay yer taxes --- 12 million illegal Mexicans rely on it."

Inside the Marietta tavern, between walls heavy with antique rifles and deer heads, anger turned to action Sunday. The **border**-watching **Minuteman** Civil Defense Corps made its metro Atlanta debut, a long way from the Rio Grande.

"This is actually an invasion that is sponsored by Mexico," **Minuteman** organizer Todd Walker told more than 40 people attending the inaugural meeting of the group's North Atlanta chapter. "Our administration ... is doing nothing to stop it. Actually, they're encouraging it."

The controversial **Minutemen** entered the national spotlight two years ago as a citizens group patrolling along the U.S.-Mexico **border** and reporting illegal crossings.

Celebrated by those who believe they exposed the U.S. **Border** Patrol's inadequacy, the **Minutemen** also have earned critics who say they inflame anti-immigrant sentiments with nativist rhetoric and actions. President Bush famously called them "vigilantes."

Now the self-proclaimed **border** watchers are expanding into the nation's interior.

The North Atlanta chapter is the third **Minuteman** group to form in Georgia in the past two months, joining the Northwest Georgia and Athens Area chapters. Organizers say they're still developing an action plan, but possibilities include surveillance of day labor pick-up sites, protests at banks catering to illegal immigrants and rallies at city council and county commission meetings.

The group also could send "compliance letters" to warn companies they suspect of employing illegal immigrants.

The idea is to put pressure on employers and local governments who may be hundreds of miles from the **border** but have power to discourage people from crossing it, said Tim Bueler, a spokesman for the Arizona-based group.

## Minutemen march far from border

The Minutemen have established 90 chapters across the country and have gained a presence in most states, he said.

Those who gathered Sunday in Marietta blamed illegal immigrants for the crime, gang graffiti and poorly maintained homes they said drag down property values and hurt neighborhoods.

Mary Kirkendoll said homes designed for single families in her south Cobb County neighborhood have turned into boarding houses for people who enter the country illegally. And illegal immigrants are fueling the local drug trade, she said, including a meth lab that police busted in a house next door to her.

"We need to let our [county] commissioners know that we need to protect our neighborhoods, not protect the illegal Mexican workers," she said.

Counting illegal immigrants is an inexact science. But both the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Pew Hispanic Center estimate that their numbers are nearing half a million in Georgia, home to one of the fastest-growing illegal immigrant populations in the country.

Some shop just across the street from Mulligan's, at the Mall de las Americas plaza. And news of the Minutemen's new foothold in Georgia didn't sit well with merchants such as Ciro Covarrubias, manager of the Carniceria La Villa meat market.

"They talk only the problems," Covarrubias said in Spanish. "Yet we do so much of the work."

Most Latin American immigrants, regardless of legal status, work in restaurants, construction sites and factories without getting into trouble with the law, he said. Covarrubias, who estimates about 75 percent of his clients are in the country illegally, motioned to the check-out aisles he says generate more than \$100,000 a year in state sales taxes alone.

Next door, at Alianza Latina, Mexico natives Felipe and Maria Teresa Pedroza waited in line to file their income taxes. The Jonesboro residents said groups such as the Minutemen fuel misconceptions that all Latinos are here illegally.

"I'm a citizen," Felipe Pedroza said.

Maria Teresa Pedroza snickered at the claim of 12 million "illegal Mexicans" on Mulligan's message board across the street, noting that's the figure for all illegal immigrants, not just those from Mexico. "They think we're all illegal," she said.

Walker, who heads the Minutemen's Athens chapter, said the group doesn't have a problem with any one nationality, only those who are in the country in violation of U.S. laws. He opened the meeting Sunday with a warning that the group won't tolerate racists.

"If you're offended by the color of someone's skin or their nation of origin, please leave immediately," he said.

Walker explained that all applicants must go through a background check. Those with a registered firearm are exempt because they've already had a check, he said.

Walker wouldn't disclose the Minutemen's membership in Georgia. But each chapter has easily eclipsed the 24-member minimum required by the national organization, Walker said.

The crowd listened to a pitch by William Greene, a Minuteman who's running for the east Georgia congressional seat held by the late Charlie Norwood.

The group asked a reporter to leave after the hourlong introduction so they could hold a strategy session. But they said their actions wouldn't stay secret for long.

## Graphic

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Photo: ELISSA EUBANKS / StaffCiro Covarrubias, manager of Carniceria La Villa market in Marietta, says most immigrants --- whether legal or illegal --- do not get in trouble with the law. He is wary of watchdog efforts by the **Minuteman** Civil Defense Corps' North Atlanta chapter./ImageData\* ImageData\*

Photo: ELISSA EUBANKS / StaffEric Svenson, 73, of Ringgold says of the **Minuteman** chapters' anti-illegal immigration efforts: "We are here to support the government who is really not doing all they can."/ImageData\* ImageData\*

Photo: ELISSA EUBANKS / StaffTodd Walker, state director of the Georgia **Minutemen**, helps lead the first meeting of the North Atlanta chapter at Mulligan's tavern in Marietta./ImageData\* ImageData\*

## Classification

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