

Minutemen shadow town's day labor site; Illegal immigration issues have popped up in suburbs like Herndon, Va., where workers, contractors are watched.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

April 5, 2006 Wednesday, Main Edition

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

Section: NEWS; Pg. 6A

Length: 1042 words

Byline: BOB DART

Body

Herndon, Va. --- **Minuteman** Bill Campenni stood on a sidewalk taking pictures of pickup trucks because he was not allowed inside the city-sponsored **site** for **day** laborers.

"This is probably the most secure border in the United States," joked the retired Air National Guard colonel, who once served in Texas with a fellow pilot named Lt. George W. Bush.

As Congress considers **immigration** reform and Hispanics across the nation march to protest proposed harsh penalties for **illegal workers**, thousands of folks **like** Campenni have enlisted in local battles over the influx of **illegal** newcomers.

"We're an expression of the frustration of people across the country," said Chris Simcox, president of the **Minuteman** Civil Defense Corps, headquartered in Scottsdale, Ariz. The group is named for the front-line militia that was among the first to fight the British in the Revolutionary War.

There are no **Minuteman** chapters in Georgia, Simcox said, but dozens of volunteers are eager to start them. He is in Georgia this week, speaking at noon today to the Georgia Association of College Republicans at Georgia Tech and at 7 p.m. Thursday to members of the Georgia Constitution Party at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Buford.

The **Minutemen**'s largest effort is concentrated on the Mexican border, where Simcox said he will have 6,847 members patrolling this month. Since the organization's founding in Arizona in 2002, it has grown to 31 chapters in 24 states, Simcox said, and about 7,000 volunteers have received **Minuteman** training.

Simcox said more than 300 people have sought to join the organization since the Senate began debate on proposals last week that could give legal status to immigrants who entered the country illegally.

'Part of the landscape'

Much of the growth is in response to local **immigration issues** in places such as **Herndon**, a **suburb** about 30 miles from Capitol Hill, Simcox said.

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Bill Threlkeld, director of the city site where day laborers come to find work, said he is unconcerned about Minutemen like Campenni, who watch from across the street as the workers, chatting in Spanish, reach into a jar and pull out chances at jobs.

The operators at the pickup site do not check would-be workers for green cards or other documentation.

"It's the employer's responsibility," Threlkeld said.

As for the Minutemen, who take photos to document the employers picking up laborers, "they're a part of the landscape," Threlkeld said. "They watch us. We watch them. We usually don't talk, but if we do, it's civil."

Minutemen are sometimes armed while patrolling the border with Mexico, but the Minutemen in the Virginia and Maryland suburbs carry only cameras and notebooks and describe their activities as more akin to a neighborhood watch.

"We don't have the authority or the ability to check workers for immigration status," said George Taplin, president of the Herndon Minutemen.

His members instead check to see whether the contractors picking up workers have proper business licenses and notify the Internal Revenue Service and state tax officials if they suspect employers "are hiring under the table and paying in cash" to avoid paying Social Security and taxes.

"Our goals are to get the government to enforce the laws," said Stephen Schreiman, the Minutemen Maryland chapter director.

But critics charge that the aim of the Minutemen observers is really to discourage workers and employers from going to the sites.

In Maryland, supporters of day labor sites have responded to the Minutemen surveillance by training their own observers.

More than 100 volunteers are ready to report any infringements of worker rights or intimidation, said Steve Smitson, manager of legal and social services for Casa de Maryland, which operates three day labor sites.

Suburban sites

The situation shows how immigration issues increasingly reach places far from the border.

The largest day labor site in the country is in suburban Langley Park, Md., where almost 350 workers a day come seeking temporary jobs during peak periods, according to "On the Corner: Day Labor in the United States," a national study by the University of California at Los Angeles.

The second-busiest site is in Chicago, according to the nationwide survey of 2,660 day laborers randomly selected at 264 hiring sites in 20 states and the District of Columbia.

The study concluded that 75 percent of these day laborers were illegal immigrants, with 59 percent born in Mexico and 38 percent born in Central America. Only 7 percent of the day laborers were born in the United States. Sixty percent had been in the country less than five years, according to the survey, released in January.

Campenni said he got involved with the Minutemen after the immigration issue invaded his "Leave It to Beaver-type neighborhood" of \$500,000 to \$600,000 houses. Three nearby residences were turned into "dorm houses" where dozens of migrant men paid \$400 or so a month for a place to sleep, he said.

"Talk about exploitation --- they're renting about half a bedroom," he said.

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"We're not after the day laborers. Gosh, you have to have compassion for those guys," said Campenni, whose father emigrated legally from Italy. "It's the contractors who are the lawbreakers."

The Herndon Official Workers Center opened in December after a convenience store parking lot became the meeting place for hundreds of day laborers and scores of would-be employers. To maintain order, the city established the official center in the parking lot behind the former police department building.

A local ordinance now makes it a misdemeanor to solicit work outside the center, explained Threlkeld, who works for Reston Interfaith, a nonprofit group contracted to operate the site.

"It's costing the taxpayers \$175,000 a year" to run the operation, said Taplin, a retired Navy officer. And that doesn't count the legal fees the city must pay to counter a lawsuit that Judicial Watch has filed in protest of public money funding what they argue is illegal activity.

Both sides in this immigration battle agree that the matter could be settled in Herndon's elections on May 2.

"It's a campaign issue," said Threlkeld.

"People in Herndon want to see this thing shut down," said Taplin. "And if we vote in a new town council, we can close down the site."

Graphic

Photo: RICK McKAY / StaffBill Campenni, a retired Air National Guard colonel and Minuteman member, photographs contractors who hire workers at a day labor site (right) in Herndon, Va. "We're not after the day laborers," he says, accusing contractors of breaking the law.

Photo: RICK McKAY / StaffWorkers at a day labor site in Herndon, Va.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspapers

Subject: ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); BORDER CONTROL (89%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (77%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (77%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (77%); US CONGRESS (77%); FOREIGN LABOR (77%); IMMIGRATION LAW (76%); PROTESTANTS & PROTESTANTISM (76%); VOLUNTEERS (75%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (56%)

Organization: ASSOCIATION OF PERFORMING ARTS PRESENTERS (55%)

Industry: MOTOR VEHICLES (58%)

Person: GEORGE W BUSH (56%)

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Geographic: ARIZONA, USA (92%); **VIRGINIA**, USA (92%); MARYLAND, USA (79%); MEXICO (92%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: April 5, 2006

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