

## Suffolk's Leader Wins a Following On Immigration

By PAUL VITELLO

June 13, 2007

A recent day in May began in crisis mode for Steve Levy, the Suffolk County executive, over an allegation that a police crackdown on unlicensed drivers amounted to the ethnic profiling of illegal immigrants.

Soon, he was preparing a response to accusations by 30 state legislators, fellow Democrats all, that his policies in this Long Island county of 1.4 million "instigate divisiveness, hatred and intolerant behavior toward immigrants."

By 2 p.m., Mr. Levy seemed relieved to turn from "the whole illegal immigration thing," as he calls it, to a topic confined to his 631 area code: a health fair for minority residents. Then an adviser asked whether the fair might be moved from a county building.

"A lot of these people are illegal," the adviser explained, "and they are afraid to come."

If politicians can be said to have relationships with issues, Mr. Levy's relationship with illegal immigration seems resentful yet clinging.

He complains that immigration detracts from his local accomplishments.

Yet he injects himself into the issue often and aggressively enough to have become almost as familiar to the national audiences of action-figure conservative commentators like Bill O'Reilly and Lou Dobbs as he is to viewers of News 12 Long Island.

Newsday calls him arguably the most formidable elected official in Long Island history. Immigrants advocates frequently accuse him of bigotry; one spokesman for local day laborers, the Rev. Allan Ramirez, has accused him of "ethnic cleansing."

Local politicians like Mr. Levy -- whose official portfolio is heavy with issues like taxes and housing, beach erosion and employee contracts -- have little sway over the federal matters of border control and immigration policy. But it is a theme that has profound resonance in the cul-de-sacs and new developments that define much of his suburban turf, and he has marshaled what tools he has to deal with its ramifications.

He has lent his police officers to town building inspectors for raids that have shuttered several dozen overcrowded rooming houses. His Consumer Affairs Department has increased arrests of unlicensed contractors -- many of whom employ illegal immigrants -- to about 300 a year from 70.

Last year, officers at the Suffolk County Jail ran immigration checks on 2,287 inmates, compared with 40 in 2004 (deportation proceedings were started against 376).

In some ways, Mr. Levy has emerged as a leader of a new breed of Democrats, who represent suburban areas that once were dominated by Republicans and remain socially conservative, particularly on questions of who lives next door.

For example, suburban Democrats in Illinois were crucial in rejecting a 2005 bill that would have allowed illegal immigrants to apply for driver's licenses. And in close state and federal races in North Carolina, Ohio and Tennessee last year, many Democratic candidates sounded tougher than the Republicans on border security.

Mr. Levy, a 47-year-old career politician finishing his first term running this county -- which has 176,000 foreign-born residents, 50,000 of whom officials estimate are here illegally -- sometimes professes frustration that the issue has largely come to define him. But it has also given him a national profile, an 80 percent local approval rating and the closest thing to a guaranteed re-election: endorsements from both the Democratic and the Republican Parties.

As the latest efforts to revamp immigration laws in Congress have disintegrated in a debate displaying a dozen shades of gray, Mr. Levy has held to a black-and-white assertion: Illegal immigration is illegal, and should be punished.

When asked about moving the county health fair, for example, he responded: "If they are committing a crime, they have something to worry about. Otherwise, they have nothing to worry about."

At his most strident, Mr. Levy warns that the country's "open borders" are an invitation to "Fort Dix terrorists," a reference to the six foreign-born men, three of them with expired visas, who were charged in May with plotting to attack an Army base in New Jersey.

At his most reflective, he says the whole matter is a question of suburban values.

"People who play by the rules work hard to achieve the suburban dream of the white picket fence," Mr. Levy said. "Whether you are black or white or Hispanic, if you live in the suburbs, you do not want to live across the street from a house where 60 men live. You do not want trucks riding up and down the block at 5 a.m., picking up workers."

Vivian Vilorio-Fisher, a Suffolk County legislator who was born in the Dominican Republic, is a Democrat who generally supports Mr. Levy but parts ways with him on his signature issue.

"The 'rules' Steve talks about are very nice, but they ignore the global economic rules that force people to come here to earn a living," she said. "The 'white picket fence' -- this is also part of a mythologized reality. As much as anything, that fence was put there to keep people out."

From Gov. Eliot Spitzer on down, officeholders in Mr. Levy's own party distance themselves from his aggressive approach. "Steve and I agree on a lot of things," Mr. Spitzer said in a brief interview, "but illegal immigration isn't one of them."

In accepting the Democratic Party's nomination in May, Mr. Levy made no reference to illegal immigration.

But a few days later at the Suffolk Republican convention, he was wildly cheered as he promised to do his part to attack "an illegal underground economy," to work hard for those who "play by the rules," and to keep at it no matter how much he was criticized by "the politically correct crowd."

“I don’t want to hurt him with his own party, but I don’t know if he even sees himself as a Democrat,” said United States Representative Peter King, a Long Island Republican whose views on immigration mirror Mr. Levy’s. “He’s a populist. I think people see him doing the right things on the immigration issue, enforcing the law.”

His seeming sure-footedness in straddling different worlds hark back to a life of fusion thinking, beginning perhaps by growing up with a Jewish father and Roman Catholic mother. Mr. Levy says he is a practicing Catholic.

After the family moved from Queens to Holbrook in Suffolk, their appliance store in Brooklyn was looted and destroyed during the 1977 blackout. Mr. Levy said that his father was “devastated, never really got over it,” and that his parents worked three jobs each just to get by.

“I know what it means to struggle, believe me,” he said. “I think it has helped me to understand people of all races, and to understand the burdens placed on our taxpayers.”

Beginning a century ago, Suffolk County’s beet and potato farms were a magnet for migrant workers from Mexico and Central America. Starting in the mid-1990s, the construction boom provided year-round work for immigrants, many of them illegal.

The county’s Hispanic population has grown to 12.6 percent, according to the latest Census Bureau estimates, from 7.6 percent in 1990 -- showing faster growth than the statewide population, but about the same as in neighboring Nassau County, where the issue has produced less political heat.

Mr. Levy dates his passion on the matter to his first campaign, for the County Legislature in 1985, when he won as a Democrat in a heavily Republican district by knocking on every door in its borders. He said that he often heard complaints about illegal immigrants in the hamlet of Farmingville, an early flashpoint in the fight over day laborers.

In the County Legislature, Mr. Levy frequently cast the lone “no” vote on spending bills -- which won him praise from tax watchdogs and resentment from fellow legislators, who branded him a grandstander. He supported an unsuccessful English-only bill that would have forbidden the printing or speaking of any other language by county agencies or employees.

Elected to the State Assembly in 2000, Mr. Levy introduced more bills in his first three months, 65, than any other freshman in history.

There were measures to cut taxes and to depoliticize election redistricting. One would have required the option of speaking to a human on all state phone-answering systems. None became law.

Now, he says, he has no plans to run for higher office. He seems to enjoy being a kind of 800-pound tuna in his own small pond.

Some political professionals attribute his lofty poll numbers to his tough stand on illegal immigration. Others, like June O’Neill, chairwoman of the state Democratic Party, say Mr. Levy’s approach to illegal immigration is “incidental to his broader vision of trying to enforce the law and help the taxpayer.”

Take the crackdown on unlicensed drivers, which has led to 123 arrests since January. The police say they have not kept track of how many were illegal immigrants. But in the face of ethnic profiling accusations, Mr. Levy expanded the sting from the Farmingville area to enforce it countywide.

“Nobody is profiling anyone,” he said. “But if some guy gets pulled over for a traffic stop and let go with a ticket, and he turns out to be one of these Fort Dix terrorists, well, that would be just terrible, wouldn’t it?”

Steve Levy

Born: Aug. 25, 1959, in Glendale, Queens.

Education: Graduate of Sachem High School in Holbrook, N.Y. (1977); State University of New York, Stony Brook (1981, magna cum laude); St. John’s University School of Law (1984).

Career: Lawyer; Suffolk County legislator (1985-2000); New York State assemblyman (2001-2003); Suffolk County executive (2004-present).

Family: Lives in Bayport with his wife (since 1995), Colleen West Levy, and stepchildren, Shannon, 23, and Erin, 21.

Hobbies: Weightlifting; following local professional sports.