



Divided Morristown at center of bitter national fight

By Elizabeth Llorente

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Morristown's proposal to let local police investigate immigration issues has turned this North Jersey town into a national battleground on the emotionally charged issue of illegal immigrants.

As congressional efforts at reforming the U.S. immigration system repeatedly stall, Mayor Donald Cresitello has struck a chord in some quarters with his request that the U.S. Homeland Security Department train and authorize his police officers to root out illegal immigrants. He also has gained a national profile with his blunt denunciations of illegal immigrants and of the federal government's failure to deal with them.

How the issue plays out in this Morris County community of more than 18,000 could have far-reaching consequences not only in other New Jersey towns but across the country. That's why the Morristown Police Department and Town Hall have been inundated with calls from people on both sides of the debate.

And it's why major national lobby groups have sent representatives to Morristown to guide community leaders -- pro and con -- on how to handle the fight over the proposal.

"They walked into our country, and into our system," Cresitello said of illegal immigrants. "The president doesn't want to protect the citizens of the United States, then I will do what I can to protect the people of Morristown."

He estimates that 1,500 illegal immigrants live in Morristown, which has long prided itself on its diversity.

The mayor is waiting for Homeland Security to respond to his request. He said town lawyers and the agency have been exchanging information but he is unsure when he will receive final word.

Homeland Security has approved a similar request for only one town, Herndon, Va. Admission into the program allows police to arrest and detain suspected illegal immigrants, and even to begin deportation proceedings. The proposal has sparked a bitter division in Morristown, with the debate about immigration echoing that of the nation.

A town meeting on the proposal earlier this year took several hours and drew hundreds of residents. Many long-time residents and officials said they had never witnessed such an emotional, divisive moment. Many illegal immigrants in Morristown already have either gone underground or left town, fearing deportation. Cresitello, who frequently links illegal immigrants with crime, said the exodus makes him feel triumphant.

"The burden has shifted to local governments because federal governments have refused to deal with illegal immigration," said Ira Meldman of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which is based in Washington, D.C. "Mayors are the ones who have to deal with the crime connected to illegal immigration and the impact of illegal immigration in other areas like education or health care."

Tensions feared

But groups that disapprove of such a hard line fear a proliferation of local immigration enforcement policies would bitterly divide communities. They argue that immigration matters are complex and involve national concerns that are beyond the scope and knowledge of local authorities.

They also say that when local officials focus on immigration status, undocumented residents go underground and stop reporting crimes against them or illegal activities they have witnessed.

“We can’t have all these mayors coming up with different ideas about how they’ll deal with immigration,” said Daniel Santo-Pietro, head of the Hispanic Directors Association of New Jersey. “We can’t allow the tensions in Morristown to fester and grow across New Jersey.”

Luis Diaz, president of the United States Hispanic Advocacy Association, a non-profit group that represents Hispanic consumers, called Morristown “the new Selma in the fight over immigration.”

Business at the modest-size Cafe y Canela Restaurant in the predominately Latino section of Morristown has dropped 40 percent. Many of the regular customers no longer eat at the restaurant. These days, they call in their orders, hurriedly walk in, pay what they owe and make a mad dash for the door.

“They feel what I can only describe as terror,” owner Saul Garavito said of the town’s illegal immigrants. “They feel they’re not safe anywhere -- they feel that at any moment, no matter where they are in this town, they are sitting ducks. They feel they must stay in the darkness, because they can be plucked and banished in the blink of an eye.”

Allan Calderon, a 22-year-old from Guatemala who crossed the U.S.-Mexican border when he was 16, wants to stay.

“I don’t ask for handouts, I start work at 5 a.m. and work until 8 p.m., no time to eat lunch,” he said. “It is a hard decision to leave everything behind -- I drank the whole way while I crossed the border so I wouldn’t think about what I was doing. I walked four days and three nights, I was crying.”

In Guatemala, he may have made 50 cents an hour; here, his carpentry work earns him \$17.50 an hour.

“I send money back, I have a son who is a U.S. citizen. I am not attacking Americans, I am working for them.”

A need for trust

At the explosive council meeting in early spring, some warned that Morristown would become a place where a segment of the population would live in terror, afraid to approach police if they were a crime victim or a potential witness.

But women spoke about feeling uncomfortable when walking past day laborers because of unwelcome comments. Some immigrants, including Hispanics, assailed illegal immigrants for not coming here as they had -- legally -- and not playing by the rules.

And they told stories -- of a house where 17 immigrants lived -- a housing practice known as “stacking.” A senior citizen said she had lost her longtime office cleaning job to an illegal immigrant.

Morristown Police Chief Pete Demnitz said he supports any tool that would help police fight crime, but at the same time has concerns about the mayor's proposal.

Demnitz said that a partnership with immigration officials could give his department yet another weapon for fighting crime. But he has let officials know that any plan should include a vow not to ask crime victims or witnesses about their immigration status.

He has worked hard, he said, with immigrant organizations to get domestic violence victims, for instance, to trust police enough to turn to them for help. Like other North Jersey police chiefs, Demnitz said most crime cannot be traced to immigrants. For the most part, he said, the day laborers give police few problems, which is more than he can say for people -- mainly non-immigrants -- who patronize Morristown's trendy and increasingly popular nightclubs.

That, he said, is the main source of a recent rise in police calls.

Be that as it may, Cresitello insists that illegal immigrants pose a threat to the community.

"They're so mobile," he said. "You don't know who they are, where they've been, where they're going. We don't intend to go into restaurants and pull people off their jobs, or chase them off the street, but if you stop someone for a motor vehicle violation, you can question them not just for state law, but also federal law."

"I am fighting for the protection of the residents," Cresitello said, "not to have drunken and disorderly people in their neighborhoods, raping their women, breaking into their home, raping and murdering their children. I don't mince words."