

Borough Thinks About Illegal Immigration Ban

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Is little Bridgeport filling up with illegal immigrants? Local officials don't know. But they intend to find out, and maybe ban them from living or working in the Montgomery County borough.

Four local council members plan to meet next week to explore whether Bridgeport will follow Riverside, N.J., and Hazleton, Pa., which have passed such laws.

Only 168 of Bridgeport's 4,300 people identified themselves as Hispanic in the 2000 census, and Councilwoman Juanita Coover said she believed most of Bridgeport's Hispanic immigrants were here legally.

Still, some Bridgeport residents are indignant that their parents arrived legally while newcomers don't follow the same rules, Coover said.

"Residents are asking questions - they want to know what are we doing," she said. "If the federal government can't do it for us, maybe it is time for us to do something ourselves."

Coover said the council would take its time studying the issue and would not rush to pass any ordinance.

Coover said residents also think illegal immigrants may be living in overcrowded apartments; Borough Manager John W. Curran Jr. said police had received sporadic complaints of overcrowding.

The potential move against illegal immigrants comes as the population of Bridgeport could increase with the construction of 1,100 high-end apartments. To pay for services, the borough wants everyone who lives in town to pay the current 1 percent income tax.

Bridgeport will use an ordinance passed in Hazleton last month as a potential model. That law says landlords who rent to illegal immigrants can be fined \$1,000; and firms that employ illegal immigrants cannot receive business permits, municipal contracts or grants. The immigrants face no penalties.

In Riverside, N.J., a similar ordinance passed last month has resulted in tenants disappearing overnight, leaving their furniture behind.

Other communities across the country have passed similar ordinances.

But legal experts and some community advocates say such laws are unlikely to hold up in court.

Eddie Cruz, director of ACLAMO, a Norristown Hispanic community service organization, said any law based on Hazleton's would violate federal law.

Cruz called the overcrowding issue "a smokescreen to make sure we get them out of here, period."

Bulmaro Olvera, 30, came to Norristown from Mexico in 1995 as an illegal immigrant, married an American citizen of Puerto Rican descent, and paid three years' worth of back taxes when he became a legal resident in 1998.

He now owns two businesses on Fourth Street in Bridgeport: a small grocery store and a Mexican restaurant, both called Los Arcos. His first restaurant, also Los Arcos, is still open in Norristown.

Olvera said most of Bridgeport's new Hispanic residents are primarily from Mexico. He believes most have visas. Many of them, he said, want to become members of the community, as he has.

"I work for the community - not just to make money for my business and send home," Olvera said.