

Immigration Measures on Hold

Council OKs motion to advertise ordinances concerning illegal aliens

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BRIDGEPORT - Borough Council voted Tuesday to advertise two proposed ordinances that address illegal aliens. One measure would restrict the undocumented from working or renting in the borough; the other mandates that official government business be in English.

Council approved a motion to advertise the Immigration Relief Act by a 7-1 vote. The English language proposal also passed 7-1.

The approvals signal that council would likely favor both ordinances when the measures come before council in October.

"I think it was obvious tonight, that we have the seven votes (for approval)," said Councilman Pete Kohut. Bridgeport worries an influx of illegal immigrants would put a strain on borough services, and that undocumented residences could avoid paying municipal taxes.

In July, the city of Hazleton and New Jersey's Riverside Township passed measures restricting undocumented individuals from holding jobs or renting property. The Hazleton measure also made English the city's official language.

At Bridgeport's Aug. 8 workshop meeting, Councilwoman Juanita Coover proposed drafting a similar ban that would prohibit employing or renting to illegal aliens.

However, the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania (ACLU) and several immigration groups filed a lawsuit Aug. 15 challenging Hazleton's ordinance.

The lawsuit prompted Bridgeport council to table its proposed measure on Aug. 22.

Borough Council then asked Bridgeport's solicitor Sal Bello to review the Hazleton lawsuit and report back to council.

Previously, Councilman John Pizza said the Riverside ban hastened the departure of undocumented workers there.

Last week, Hazleton voted to scrap the ordinance it approved July 13 for an overhauled version that is expected to have a better chance of withstanding a court challenge.

Hazleton's Illegal Immigration Relief Act fines landlords \$1,000 for each illegal-alien tenant and has the power to suspend business licenses of those employing undocumented workers.

While the revised Hazleton bill still punishes landlords and businesses, it puts the burden of verifying immigration status on the city, gives landlords and employers time to correct violations before sanctions are imposed and reduces penalties.

Hazleton agreed last week not to enforce the original measure in exchange for the ACLU's pledge not to file an injunction against the city.

Under the agreement, Hazleton must give the plaintiffs at least 20 days' notice before it begins enforcing the law.

Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta proposed the ordinance after two illegal immigrants were arrested for shooting and killing a man.

Under the new Hazleton law, the federal government would determine an individual's immigration status. The ACLU lawsuit was filed on behalf of 11 Hazleton residents and business owners and three nonprofit organizations, according to ACLU's Web site.

The suit claims Hazleton's original ordinance violated the U.S. Constitution's Supremacy Clause, because it seeks to override federal law and the exclusive federal power over immigration.

Also, the suit claims the city's "English only" provision violates city residents' First Amendment rights to free speech, the ACLU said.

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