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Council passes tough anti-immigration measures

City bars renting to them, makes English the official language; Latinos call divisions 'sad'

By THOMAS KOROSEC
Houston Chronicle

FARMERS BRANCH — A Dallas suburb took the fight against illegal immigration into its own hands Monday when its City Council unanimously barred landlords from renting to undocumented tenants, making it the first city in Texas to take such a step.

The six council members in Farmers Branch, an inner-ring bedroom community set 11 miles from downtown Dallas, also unanimously resolved to make English its official language and voted to enroll police officers in a federal training program that will make them de facto immigration officials.

"It seems this has been slowly building," lifelong Farmers Branch resident Tony Reyes said after the vote. "Things have been getting more and more divided, and it's very sad."

Some among a generally well-behaved overflow crowd that spilled into the lobby of City Hall erupted into a shouting match after the vote was announced, although the calm prevailed as a heavy police presence stood by.

"I don't like to be called a hater just because I disagree with someone," said taxi driver Gerald Colgrove, who supported the ordinances.

Most of those seated in council chambers gave a standing ovation once the ordinances passed.

Two Hispanic state representatives from the area addressed members before the vote, with other public comment reserved for afterward. State Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, doubted the ordinances would have much effect and expressed relief that stricter measures were not passed.

"There was a lot of heat and smoke, but ultimately not much happened," said Anchia, who predicted the biggest effect would be bad publicity for the city of 28,000, of which more than one-third are Hispanic.

Other Latinos in attendance felt more strongly.

"It's un-Christian. It's un-American. It's un-Texan," said Domingo Garcia, the national civil rights chairman for the League of United Latin American Citizens. "They're picking on the most defenseless."

Groups have challenged such measures elsewhere around the country and Carlos Quintanilla, a LULAC organizer in Dallas, said his group will start looking for someone to sue. The first step will be to seek a temporary restraining order from a judge.

Councilman Tim O'Hare, a personal injury attorney who proposed the ordinances but backed off another one that would have penalized businesses that hire illegal immigrants, said he believes they will pass constitutional muster.

"This will benefit every single person who lives in this city, regardless of race, color, creed or national origin, as long as they are in the country legally," he said.

As for the language resolution, O'Hare argued people remained free in Farmers Branch to communicate however they chose, but that city business would be done in English.

Farmers Branch is following the lead of Hazleton, Pa., which earlier this year passed an ordinance to fine landlords who rent to illegal immigrants, deny business permits to companies that employ them and require tenants to register and pay for a rental permit. A federal judge has temporarily blocked enforcement of the Hazleton restrictions while he considers a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union and others.

O'Hare contends that illegal immigrants are a driving factor in the decline of Farmers Branch neighborhoods, and that cities have the right to act because the federal government has failed to secure its borders.

Before O'Hare's latest push, it had appeared the anti-immigration effort in Farmers Branch had peaked in September, when the matter was tabled and the council instead enacted a nonbinding resolution urging the federal government to enforce existing immigration laws.

Mayor Bob Phelps said in a recent interview that debate hurt the city economically because an agricultural products company put off plans to relocate to the city as a result of the controversy.

The flap has given Farmers Branch "an image of being intolerant, and that scares away business," Phelps said.