

Houston immigrant groups set to march on May 1

Rally will target legislation that would add border agents, require employers to verify workers' status

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By SUSAN CARROLL

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Immigrant advocates in Houston on Wednesday called for supporters of comprehensive immigration reform to join a May 1 march downtown as part of a larger, nationwide protest.

The Houston march is scheduled to coincide with protests, marches and rallies across the country, said Maria Jimenez, a longtime Houston activist, calling it a "national mobilization." Organizers had no projected turnout for the march, which will start at 2 p.m. in front of the Mickey Leland Federal Building at 1919 Smith St., and end at Antioch Park at 1400 Smith St.

"We're inviting the community to stand up for itself," said Cesar Espinoza, an organizer with the Central American Resource Center in southwest Houston. "We need to fight laws that damage our communities and our families."

Organizers said they were hoping to bring attention to a bill pending in Congress called the SAVE Act, the Secure America with Verification and Enforcement Act, which would add an estimated 8,000 U.S. Border Patrol agents and require employers to use federal databases to verify the status of all workers. The SAVE Act offers no path toward legalization for the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S.

Lorenzo Cano, associate director of the University of Houston Center for b10Mexican American Studies, said the act misses the crux of the immigration issue by focusing primarily on enforcement and ignoring the millions of immigrants drawn to the U.S. for work.

"Congress and the President have really dropped the ball on immigration in recent years," Cano said. "Particularly during the presidential campaign, we need to remind our elected officials that we cannot forget the needs and human rights of undocumented immigrants in the United States."

In 2006, hundreds of thousands of immigrants took to the streets in opposition to legislation sponsored by Wisconsin Republican Jim Sensenbrenner. The legislation would have made living in the U.S. illegally a criminal — not civil — infraction and beefed up the Border Patrol and extended the international fence.

The Sensenbrenner legislation was credited as being the catalyst for the largest immigration marches in recent U.S. history. On May 1, 2006, hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters took to the streets in major cities and small town across

the country, including a turnout of about 10,000 in Houston. The bill passed the House, but not the Senate.

Anti-illegal immigration activists criticized the massive protests, saying immigrants were flaunting the fact that they broke laws, and then were demanding rights. One conservative blogger called the marches "parades of lawbreakers."

Pro-immigrant organizers declared victory after the Sensenbrenner defeat and massive marches, but said immigration worksite raids during the past two years have caused fear in immigrant communities and tempered turnouts at events and protest. The pro-immigrant movement has suffered a series of setbacks and defeats in the past two years, as attempts to pass legislation with a legalization component have failed and cities and towns across the country passed their own legislation aimed at curtailing illegal immigration.

Last year's May 1 demonstration in Houston was significantly smaller, with about 100 protestors, though a protest days earlier brought closer to 1,000, Jimenez said.

Recent steps taken by the Bush Administration, including workplace raids and attempts to seize land along the U.S.-Mexico border to extend the fence, may help drive turnout for the May 1 march, organizers said. Jimenez said the SAVE Act, which has been dubbed as a "baby Sensenbrenner" bill in activist circles, likely will also help bring out supporters of legalization.

"It looks like anti-immigration forces are moving forward (with the SAVE Act)," she said. "So it looks like we are going to move forward, too."