

Putting a lid on the melting pot
Mayor John Kimmel seeks to rid Arcadia, Wis., of illegal immigrants. He is proposing rules on language, signs and the flying of foreign flags.

By Robert Gutsche Jr
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ARCADIA, Wis. - Francisco Acuhua milks cows, harvests food and works as a farmhand with dozens of other Mexican immigrants—some legal, some not—to raise enough money for his family across the border and to help his girlfriend, Sarah, be a stay-at-home mother.

Acuhua, 21, says he isn't afraid of hard work, but living in this town is getting increasingly difficult for immigrant workers after the mayor said last month that he wants to oust undocumented immigrants.

"If you employ illegal immigrants or rent to or house illegal immigrants, there will be consequences," Mayor John Kimmel, a 31-year-old who manages a local bar and grill, wrote in his hometown newspaper. "They [immigrants] are not welcome here!"

The mayor's proposals have nearly divided this western Wisconsin community of 2,400 people as Arcadia, which is north of La Crosse, has become the latest town to propose or pass measures aimed at undocumented immigrants. Similar efforts have emerged in Hazleton, Pa., and elsewhere.

They come as immigration legislation remains on hold in Congress. The House and Senate have approved different measures, with the House bill focusing on enforcement and the Senate bill providing ways for illegal immigrants to obtain citizenship.

Under the Arcadia proposals, English would be the official language in the town, all directional signs would be in English and people flying foreign flags would have to fly the U.S. flag also. A video store has long displayed Mexican flags but not an American flag.

The new rules would include alerting federal agencies about undocumented workers living in the town, as well as restricting the number of people allowed to live in a rental housing unit.

Acuhua, who speaks Spanish and doesn't use English much, said he and his friends were shocked that the community they call home might be turning against them. Officials estimate that as many as 300 immigrants live and work in Arcadia, but it is not known how many are undocumented.

"This isn't right," Acuhua said. "They should not be doing this to us."

It is not clear when—or even if—the mayor's proposed ordinances will go to the City Council for discussion. Late last month, more than 90 residents turned out for a meeting on the matter that became heated. Since then, the mayor has stopped talking to reporters.

Kimmel said in an interview earlier with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that his proposed ordinances would not be like those in Hazleton, Pa. He also denied that he wants to enforce federal immigration laws, saying he just wants to provide local sanctions.

The mayor said he was responding to complaints from constituents, and he seems surprised by the reaction he has received from near and far. "Locally, I've gotten more positive feedback than heat," he said.

Meanwhile, local churches have been working to calm tensions.

"What we want to be trying to do is not join that list of cities elsewhere who have been on one side or the other of this issue," said Rev. Michael Klos, a priest whose separate Spanish-language mass at Holy Family Catholic Church has been attracting 75 to 100 people each Sunday since May.

"This issue is not done yet," he said. "It can't be done yet. We can't sweep this under the rug. What we need to do is see how we can have a positive outcome."

What's happening in local governments across the country, including in Arcadia, can easily be blamed on national politics, said John Keeley, communications director with the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington think tank that favors strong immigration control.

"Washington isn't doing its job," Keeley said. "And this is a cultural flare-up that is attendant to [an immigration] policy unabated for three decades. In addition to the concerns over quality of education, access to health care ... there is what I call a 'press-one-for-English-press-two-for-Spanish' phenomenon. And many Americans are fed up with this." The owner of Arcadia's San Juan Mini Market, which caters to Mexican residents through the sale of authentic Mexican music, foods and decorations, offers a different view.

Mateo Barrientos said many of his customers have been frustrated and confused about the views expressed by Kimmel and supported by some in talks at coffee shops and in local newspapers.

"Even with the [immigration] laws in the U.S.," Barrientos said, "many of the people here say the city can't do all this to them because we are human beings."

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