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New Jersey Town Offers Immigration Insights

By David Dyssegaard Kallick

In the midst of ongoing battles about local laws aimed at illegal immigrants in Long Island, a business leader from Riverside New Jersey came to a forum in Central Islip earlier this week to give a warning about the experience of his town. "Don't do what we did," he warned.

What did Riverside do?

In 2006, a minority of vocal individuals in the town pushed through a series of aggressive anti-immigrant laws, mandating fines for anyone who hired, rented to, or in any way aided an undocumented immigrant. The law was broad, but the message was clear: immigrants are not welcome.

Within months of the law being passed, businesses closed, David Verduin, president of the Riverside Coalition of Business Owners and Landlords, told the audience. The main street emptied out. Skinheads came in to celebrate the new laws, yelling "the south shall rise again!" Giraldo Rivera came to film a program about the anti-immigrant climate. Fine points about the distinction between illegal and legal immigrants were lost; anyone from somewhere else felt unwelcome and hundreds, maybe thousands, picked up and left.

The New York *Times* confirms Verduin's cautionary tale. "With the departure of so many people," a 2007 story reported, "the local economy suffered. Hair salons, restaurants and corner shops that catered to the immigrants saw business plummet; several closed. Once-boarded-up storefronts downtown were boarded up again."

Just one year later, the local politicians who led the fight had been turned out of office, the laws were repealed, and the town took on a series of efforts to build better connections with its immigrant community.

"Don't do this," Verduin said bluntly. "It will drag the reputation of your town into the mud."

Business leaders in Long Island are beginning to take note, and some are nervous that the area may develop an anti-immigrant reputation. Matthew Crosson, president of the Long Island Association, pointed out at the forum how quickly, even if sometimes unfairly, an area can become associated with intolerance in a way that it might have to live with for a very long time.

"If I said the name of the town 'Skokie, Illinois,'" Crosson asked, "what would that say to you?" Three decades later and halfway across the country, it was clear that the majority thought of Skokie not a pleasant Chicago suburb, but as the site of a heated battle involving American Nazis, the local Jewish community, and the ACLU.

Like everywhere else in the country, Crosson pointed out, Long Island is in tight competition for energetic, creative young people who will contribute to economic growth. A reputation for intolerance is the last thing Long Island needs, and could have a long-term effect on the local economy.

Long Island is a long way from being, or being seen as, an anti-immigrant enclave. But, it doesn't take many acts of intolerance to sear a stereotype into the public's mind. The shocking beating in 2000 of two Mexican day laborers still rings in our

ears. Recent efforts to pass local laws that would "crack down" on immigrants with a heavy hand are not doing Long Island any favors, either. It's not too soon for leaders to stand up and talk about community values. Politicians have to play a role, but so, as well, do business, labor, religious, and other local leaders.

If Riverside in 2006 shows the wrong way to address a problem, Riverside in 2008 seems to point in the right direction. Business and community leadership have mobilized to set the town on a balanced course. Talking about the town's reaction to immigrants, Verduin said: "If one of the complaints is that they don't learn English, why don't we teach them?" If housing laws are being violated, enforce them. Most important, according to Verduin, is to find the leaders in the immigrant communities and talk about the problems and ways to solve them together.

In the process, you might also have some fun. In Riverside, discussions between immigrant groups and civic leaders led to the planning of "Junefest" a traditional Brazilian celebration that the town will stage for the first time this year.

If you want to see the progress we've made, Verduin urged Long Islanders, come join us on June 28.

Everyone is welcome.

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