

Immigration Debate Goes Local (or Loco), by Ryan Stark Lilienthal

With the U.S. federal government unable to produce a nationwide bill to fix our broken immigration system, local communities are taking immigration enforcement into their own hands – action that will inevitably produced tragic consequences for immigrants, and their families; and inflict harm on the communities zealously trying to expel the newcomers.

In July, Riverside, New Jersey’s governing body passed an ordinance that precludes businesses from operating in the town that hire undocumented workers; and that punishes landlords who rent property to undocumented tenants. This ordinance follows a similar one passed in Hazelton, Pennsylvania. Both ordinances are being challenged in court and on the streets of these towns.

Fueling anti-immigrant sentiment in these towns and throughout the country is the initiative pushed by Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives to stymie proposals that legalize undocumented immigrants. This summer, Republican congressmen conducted town hall-style meetings throughout the country to advance their anti-legalization/enforcement-only agenda. Predictably, the congressional summertime activity is fanning xenophobic flames in communities like Riverside.

Whether the Riverside ordinance successfully expels immigrants, or not, Riverside Township will be a loser. The Township is now a staging ground for activists on all sides of the immigration debate. Riverside businesses already report dropping sales generally, and from immigrants in particular. Some township business owners, in fact, have joined others in filing a \$10 million lawsuit against the municipality for the economic damage wrought by the ordinance and challenging the ordinance’s constitutionality.

In the long-run, the greatest damage will be the lost opportunity to enhance Riverside's future economic growth and civic vitality that comes to towns which welcome immigrant communities noted for their motivation, work-ethic, and strong family values. Underscoring this point, The New York Times reports that, "[t]he downtown streets of this working-class town [Riverside] -- usually filled with many of the immigrants who have made this place home -- were unusually empty the day after the Township Council approved an ordinance banning employers and landlords from hiring or housing illegal immigrants." Hopefully, this first taste of life without immigrants will be a wake-up call to the Township's policymakers, and serve as a reminder of the benefits immigrants bring to the towns in which they live.