

Danbury latest front in illegal immigration debate

By JOHN CHRISTOFFERSEN
Associated Press Writer

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DANBURY, Conn. -- Thousands of miles from where the so-called Minutemen volunteers patrol the Mexican border, this small city has erupted as a hotbed in a growing national debate over illegal immigration.

Danbury has been transformed in recent years with waves of new immigrants from Brazil, Ecuador and other countries. The newer immigrants often do landscaping and build the stone walls in Connecticut's richest towns and settle in Danbury, where housing is more affordable.

Mayor Mark Boughton, a Republican who has a reputation as a moderate, is asking that state police be licensed as immigration agents to crack down on illegal immigration. He's also proposed spiking neighborhood volleyball games that attract large crowds of immigrants.

Immigrants fear a citywide sweep. Boughton estimates there are 10,000 to 15,000 illegal immigrants in the city, along with Danbury's official population of 77,000 people.

He said the influx has strained schools, created overcrowded housing and led to other problems such as unlicensed and unregistered drivers.

"You can be pro-immigrant, which I am, but anti-illegal immigration," Boughton said. "We are a nation of immigrants. We are also a nation of laws."

The national debate has traditionally focused on border states. In Arizona, a group of volunteers known as the Minutemen are patrolling the Mexican border, dissatisfied with the U.S. Border Patrol's efforts there.

Immigrants traditionally have settled in a half dozen states such as Texas, New York and California. In recent years they have increasingly moved to other states such as North Carolina, Iowa and Georgia and smaller cities such as Danbury, experts say.

"I think people are very frustrated because they see change happening and they don't comprehend it," said Carina Bandhauer, an assistant professor of sociology at Western Connecticut State

University in Danbury. "This is sort of a second wave of immigration. People now have made links to outlying cities such as Danbury."

Boughton is proposing a new position to mediate neighborhood disputes and an ordinance that would curb the number of volleyball games allowed in residential areas. But fed up with federal inaction, he has proposed deputizing state police as immigration agents. A federal law that allows the move after training has only been implemented so far in two southern states, Alabama and Florida, and Los Angeles, while other cities have considered the idea.

"This doesn't mean this will form a posse," Boughton said. "It's simply another tool in helping us manage a very difficult problem."

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal told Boughton in a letter Friday that other state officials would have to agree to reach an arrangement with federal officials to deputize state police. Blumenthal said the move could offer advantages, including access to federal databases that may help in law enforcement and national security matters.

Boughton said he plans to pursue the proposal with other state officials.

Critics say giving police immigration authority makes it harder for them to do their job because immigrants become reluctant to call them in an emergency.

Immigrant leaders say the newcomers do jobs many Americans do not want to do. Noting they have enjoyed friendly relations with city officials, they say they were shocked by the volleyball proposal and suggest the city build more volleyball courts to avoid neighborhood tensions.

"What I am against is the discriminatory or racial connotation that this may have," said Wilson Hernandez, past president of the Ecuadorean Civic Center of Greater Danbury. "This is a suburb where we find part of that life we left behind. It's quiet, clean."

But Boughton, who is running for re-election this year, said some noisy games continue for days and parked cars clog residential roads.

"They bring in port-a-potties," Boughton said. "I get ladies calling us up crying. It's just an absolute disaster in terms of what it does to the neighborhood."

David Bonner, a firefighter who grew up in Danbury, said his neighbor built a fence nearly 20 feet high and set up lights like a stadium for volleyball games. One day there was 32 cars, he said.

"The issue next door to me is not a prejudicial thing," Bonner said. "They block the streets. They're loud. I tried to talk to them. They didn't want to hear me."

A new statewide group that favors the crackdown clashed last week with pro-immigrant protesters. At the first meeting of the new group, an immigrant rights activist walked out after arguing with a man whose son was killed in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"Open borders led to the deaths of 3,000 Americans on 9-11," said Peter Gadiel, a Kent resident who lost his son in the attack.

He won a loud applause from nearly 200 in attendance, mostly white and older residents, as he declared his opposition to any amnesty for illegal immigrants. Gadiel, the son of German immigrants who were refugees, noted that supporters don't like to call the immigrants illegal, suggesting sarcastically they be called criminals or lawbreakers.

"Excuse me you are speaking a lot of garbage," said Maria-Cinta Lowe, who runs the city's Hispanic Center, as she stood up with her cane to protest.

She was shouted down as police escorted her outside.

As the meeting ended, one woman shouted, "I want my country back. I want my language back."

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