

Riverside ready for alternative

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RIVERSIDE — It turns out that to be on the front line of this country's illegal immigration debate, it takes deep pockets — and Riverside doesn't have them.

"We need a new town hall, police station, new equipment for public works and money to fix our roads," Mayor George Conard said Friday, a day after a somewhat contentious Township Committee meeting that potentially marked the beginning of the end of the township's Illegal Immigration Relief Act.

"I can't do all this and fight these lawsuits. We can't afford it," Conard said, referring to two lawsuits filed against the township in federal and state courts.

The lawsuits challenge the controversial law adopted last summer that prohibits business owners and landlords from hiring or housing illegal immigrants.

What the township can afford is to step up its housing-code enforcement, implement a pilot parking-permit program and join in a new statewide push to notify federal authorities of illegal immigrants who have been arrested for indictable offenses.

The new initiatives were announced by Township Solicitor George Sapornaro Thursday night shortly after the Township Committee introduced an ordinance that would rescind the township's anti-illegal immigration law.

Conard said the township's latest strategy may not be the approach some might have wanted, but he's hopeful the initiatives will go a long way in solving some of the problems long associated with the illegal immigrants in town. The first thing the township plans to do is add another code enforcement officer to crack down on any overcrowded living conditions occurring in township residences.

"I'm going to hire a Class 2 police officer to work as a code enforcement officer," Conard said. "The officer would be part time probably until January, and then (we'll) make it a full-time position once we do our budget."

Currently, the township only has a part-time code enforcement officer who is shared with Delanco.

Police Chief Paul Tursi said the additional officer would be used primarily for enforcing housing code violations such as overcrowding and other "quality of life issues."

What the officer won't be doing is prowling the streets for illegal immigrants.

"That's the federal government's problem," Tursi said.

He did say the Police Department will continue to notify U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) of anyone who is arrested for a serious crime and is believed to be an illegal immigrant.

Earlier this week, New Jersey Attorney General Anne Milgram issued a directive for all law enforcement agencies to begin to notify federal authorities of any illegal immigrants arrested for indictable offenses or drunken driving.

"The directive makes it a little clearer for our officers," Tursi said.

As for implementing the parking permit program, Conard said he hopes it will alleviate some of the problems with the "white vans" being parked throughout the township.

Many residents have complained that illegal immigrants who work for some area contractors clog the streets with their white vans with Pennsylvania license tags parked throughout the township.

Under the parking permit program, residents would be required to show proof of residency in the township before being issued a parking permit.

"Basically, to park on the street you would have to documentation that you live in (a nearby) house," Tursi said.

He said officials are still trying to work out how many permits to issue to each home and other details before rolling the program out in some of the problem areas in town.

"In the event we try it and we find that it needs to be changed in some ways, we'll do that so it will work," Tursi said.

While some residents in attendance at Thursday's meeting were not ready to concede the legal battle, some were ready to give township officials a chance.

"If this law doesn't work, then do something else," Geri Mingin said after the meeting. "I just don't want them to say. 'Let's give up.'"

Conard said he's not giving up, but residents need to understand that the township found itself on its own and couldn't afford to keep up a fight that the federal government hasn't been able to solve in decades.

"All the people out there that were going to help us out, we got \$225 in our legal defense fund... and we haven't even got to the depositions yet," Conard said. "We don't have (the millions of dollars) to take this to the (U.S.) Supreme Court."

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