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02/21/07 - Posted from the Daily Record newsroom

Citizenship applications up in '06

In year of immigration debate, number increases 19 percent from 2005

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WASHINGTON -- More immigrants applied to become U.S. citizens last year than any year since 1999, thanks largely to the national debate over border security and illegal immigration.

Government officials, advocates for immigrants and demographers said the increased applications mirrored a similar spike about a decade ago, the last time illegal immigration was so prominent in national politics.

Applications for citizenship increased more than 19 percent over the 2005 fiscal year, with 721,268 immigrants seeking to become naturalized in fiscal 2006, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials. A total of 696,020 new citizens were sworn in during 2006.

"Every time there's an immigration debate, there's always a big surge in applications for naturalization," said Dan Kane, a spokesman for the agency.

Immigration officials also have proposed higher fees for naturalization and other services, which may be pushing immigrants to apply before costs rise. Citizenship applications in the first quarter of this fiscal year are on pace to exceed last year's totals.

Pertha Banjee, a former executive director with the Newark-based New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, believes the fee increase will actually dissuade more immigrants from applying to become naturalized citizens, which is already a difficult process.

"Even if they wanted to be a part of the American citizenry, they cannot do that for several reasons-immigration back laws, a very cumbersome system and an extremely long wait on the line," said Banjee, who currently volunteers for the Wind of the Spirit in Morristown. "The fee increase...is a huge damper and discouragement for them."

Amy Gottlieb, director of the Newark-based American Friends Service Committee, said the groups will gather March 1 in front of the Rodino Federal Building in protest of the "excessive" and "unrealistic" fees.

"It is wrong for USCIS to place the burden of improving services on the backs of immigrants," she said.

"We hope that Congress will take responsibility for funding the services rather than allowing the office to place this excessive requirement on immigrants."

Banjee believes the government has a double standard regarding the plight of documented immigrants.

"On one hand, they're encouraging them to become citizens of the so-called American dream,"he said. "But at the same time, rising application fees discourage them from becoming citizens."

The sometimes ugly tone of the debate over illegal immigration -- political ads played up the dangers of lax border security and state referendums restricted services to undocumented foreigners -- led some immigrants to become citizens after years of living here with "green cards" as permanent legal residents.

"A lot of people felt that they didn't need to take that step to be considered a member of the community -- a respectable, acceptable member of the community," said Clarissa Martinez de Castro, director of state and local policy for the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Latino civil rights group. "People are getting shaken in their foundation of that belief."

Government officials haven't published statistics on where the last year's new citizens came from. In previous years, most came from Mexico, China, Indiaand the Philippines. State-by-state information on where the new citizens have settled will be

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available later this year.

Some analysts say the jump in citizenship applications could change the national political landscape -- just as California's political landscape changed after 1994. That change occurred after a state law restricting services to undocumented immigrants led to an increase in citizenship applications.

"There is also a positive element to this whole dynamic, which is that the way that we can stop the demagogues and the reactionaries from insulting us on a daily basis on television is to become citizens, to register and to vote because that is what matters in a democracy," said Sergio Bendixen, a Democratic pollster based in Miami who studies Latino public opinion.
