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Morris rejects jail wing for illegals

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BY ELIZABETH LLORENTE

Morris County officials have denied a request by Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello to open an unused wing of the county jail to hold immigration violators.

Cresitello says the county's decision, heavily based upon the recommendation of Morris County Sheriff Edward Rochford, dooms his yearlong efforts to win federal approval to deputize Morristown police to enforce immigration laws.

Rochford's report raised concerns over an estimated \$1.5 million in start-up costs for housing immigration detainees, and the potential for the jail to become the target of protests and lawsuits by civil rights groups.

"The sheriff did a very thorough report," said Morris County Administrator John Bonanni. "It was presented to the freeholders, and it was accepted."

Cresitello drew national attention when he began his campaign nearly a year ago to deputize police in Morristown. He said illegal immigrants were diminishing the quality of life through such things as loitering and living in overcrowded conditions. His campaign came amid a national trend in which local officials, frustrated by failed efforts in Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform laws, were taking it upon themselves to address illegal immigration.

The mayor said officials of the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, told him that securing the jail space was crucial to admission into 287G, the program that provides the training and authority to enforce immigration laws.

"If the county doesn't participate, we can't do 287G," Cresitello said. "Our proposal is dead. We wasted our time and a substantial amount of legal fees."

County officials said they studied data, consulted with law enforcement officials of other counties and met with ICE authorities before deciding to reject Cresitello's request.

They said they already contact ICE about immigrants who come to their jail because of criminal charges. This enables ICE to begin deportation proceedings before an immigrant tied to a serious crime can post bail and be released. They said they'd need new policies and resources to handle 287G detainees arrested and detained for immigration violations, which are civil, not criminal.

"Illegal immigration is a federal issue," said the jail warden, Frank Corrente, whom Rochford consulted. "The federal government is the one that needs to address the floodgates. I can load up my jail with them, and you're still not fixing anything."

Cresitello bitterly criticized ICE for imposing the requirement that Morristown secure jail space as part of its 287G application. He said ICE should provide the jail space, and that putting that burden on local officials would discourage others from applying for 287G.

"If they're serious about enforcing immigration, they need to remove that rule," Cresitello said. "They should accommodate those [287G] prisoners."

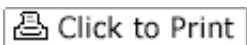
ICE spokesman Michael Gilhooly declined to respond directly to Cresitello's comments, saying that ICE does not comment on 287G matters between the agency and an applicant until a contract is finalized.

Cresitello said he wanted his police to be able to check – and if need be, act upon -- the immigration status of people they come across during the normal routine of their work. Opponents of 287G argue that it will encourage racial profiling.

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