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Appreciate Cresitello for being candid, not for immigration stance

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"Eighty percent of the people in Morris County agree with me."

So said Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello about his proposal to deputize up to 10 town police officers to enforce federal immigration law. The mayor commented after a Monday press conference by opponents of the measure at the Morris County Library and before Tuesday night's council meeting in Morristown.

Told that there seemed to be many opponents, the mayor said, "They're wrong."

As always, you've got to appreciate candor and Cresitello, or "Donny" to his friends, says what he thinks. That's a good thing, given the fact many elected officials do not.

Who knows if 80 percent of Morris County residents back Cresitello's get tough plan on illegal residents. Support for the idea in Morristown is probably far less than 80 percent. That's more relevant. In fact, it's not even 80 percent on the town council. Opponents said that as of Monday, they had gotten about 3,600 petition signatures opposed to the mayor's plan. While some of them probably do not live in town, the high number of signatures indicates intense opposition.

In saying "They're wrong," the mayor's point is as follows: His plan is for deputized police officers to enforce federal immigration law in regard to other illegal activities. Stacking would be one. Illegal residents who commit crimes would be another.

The idea, the mayor says, is not for these officers to stop people in the street. He faults opponents of his plan for falsely spreading that rumor.

The fear of some is that once police officers are deputized, they will have the power to stop people in the street and demand identification. And who's to say it would not happen.

We take our freedoms seriously in America. Police should not stop, or check out, anyone unless there is a legitimate reason to do so. This plan could let them do it, even if that is not the intent.

This, of course, could be much ado about nothing. There's no guarantee that the mayor's request will be approved. On the other hand, it could be one of the more significant acts of his term.

As always, the politics is interesting. The mayor ran with strong support from the African-American community, but two African-American council members oppose his idea to deputize police officers.

Cresitello is theoretically a Democrat, a party that rightly is associated with helping those in need and respecting the equality of all human beings. In Washington, it is Democrats -- most of them, at least -- who support immigration reform that would ease the path to citizenship for illegals working here. President Bush also backs this approach.

So, what gives with Cresitello?

What gives is that Cresitello really isn't much of a Democrat. More than once in his career he has switched parties when it became more convenient to be an independent or a Republican. He'll tell you that he concentrates on what's best for the town rather than adhering to party ideals and principles.

That sounds like a hard-nosed and practical way to do things. But it also leads to taking steps that may be politically appealing at the time, but wrong in the long run. About a quarter of the town's population is Latino. Does it make sense politically to annoy a quarter of the town for the sake of "being tough" on illegal residents?

The mayor, a stubborn sort, apparently thinks so.

In an amusing conversation with me the other day, he volunteered that he didn't really care all that much about what was said about him on the Daily Record editorial page.

I laughed and said, "I don't take that personally."

Without missing a beat, Cresitello retorted, "I don't care if you take it personally."

As was said above, you can't dislike an elected official who is candid.

But you don't have to like his policies. Nothing personal, of course.

Fred Snowflack is editorial page editor of the Daily Record. His column appears every Wednesday. Contact him at fsnowfla@gannett.com. or (973) 428-6617.
