

Wind of the Spirit immigration forum brings out experts on 287(g) in Morristown

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Jamie Duffy Nearly 100 people attended a forum on 287(g) at St. Margaret's of Scotland Church on Speedwell Avenue in Morristown on Saturday. At left: Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello, who continues to press for the law's implementation, with Wind of the Spirit members Bob Brite and Stuart Sydenstricker.

When it comes to 287(g), the federal law that allows local police to act as deputized immigration officials, Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello's stance has become a reflection of how complicated immigration reform can be.

The Mayor left some immigration advocates scratching their heads today at Morristown's St. Margaret's Church, where he addressed a forum sponsored by the pro-immigrant rights group Wind of the Spirit.

"It's very confusing," said Diana Mejia, WotS founder. "On one hand, he's saying he's for immigration reform. On the other hand, he's still talking about contractors and all this stuff he said at the end."

The Mayor supports a "pathway to citizenship" for illegal immigrants, he said at the start of the forum, entitled "What Would 287(g) Mean for Morristown, New Jersey?"

However, he favors strict enforcement of the border, and reiterated that to cross the border illegally is a federal crime. Hiring undocumented workers and housing them are also federal crimes.

"I'm not trying to solve the social problems of the world," he said at the end, blaming corruption and a lack of education in the countries of origin as the reason 12 million people are in the U.S. illegally.

Cresitello, a Democrat running for re-election this year in a contested primary, proposed deputizing Morristown's police officers as immigration agents in February 2007, but was shot down later that year when Morris County Sheriff Edward Rochford, a Republican, said the program would cost too much to implement.

And even though President Barack Obama is calling for comprehensive immigration reform that most likely would nullify 287(g), Cresitello has continued to defend the law while acknowledging that reform could change everything.

His Democratic primary opponent said a lot would depend on the Obama administration. "We have to see where our federal government is going with this issue," said Tim Dougherty, Democratic opponent in the mayoral primary this June. "A lot hinges on what our president does. Everybody agreed that there is a pathway to legalization. I don't think anybody thinks that this country is going to send 12 million people back to their countries. There was a lot of data put out there today that a lot of people were not aware of like crime statistics where 287(g) is implemented."

Uncontested Republican mayoral candidate James Gervasio was also present, but did not comment on 287(g), nor could he be reached afterwards.



Jamie Duffy Mayor Donald Cresitello, 287 (g) champion, with Amy Gottlieb of the American Friends Service Network.

Other panelists included Amy Gottlieb of the Newark-based American Friends Service Committee, a pro-immigrant rights group; Ryan Stark Lilienthal, an immigration lawyer who is associated with the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network in Newark and is a former Princeton Borough councilman; Aarti Shahani, lead author of "Local Democracy on ICE: Why State and Local Governments Have no Business in Federal Immigration Law Enforcement" (Justice Strategies, February 2009); and Sarahi Uribe, an organizer with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network who has interviewed the nation's most high-profile 287(g) law enforcement officer, Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Arizona.

Many of the panelists referred to a report published by the federal General Accounting Office (GAO) in March that found fault with 287(g) and the way ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents carried out the law. ICE is an agency of the Department of Homeland Security.

Critics contend 287(g) spurs illegal immigrants to hide "in the shadows," making them reluctant to report a crimes against them because of the deportation threat. By extension, communities become fractured when trust and confidence is lost between people and law enforcement, the panelists said.

Cresitello believes that if his police officers were also 287(g) officers, some local criminals would have already been caught. But he scoffed at the idea that any racial profiling had occurred.

"I'm not really concerned about the implementation of 287(G) as much as I'm concerned about illegal immigrants," he said at the beginning. "But a pathway to legalization does not mean amnesty."

The Mayor said everyone "should be treated fairly because they all have the same civil rights here," but added "a reasonable fine" should be levied "because they did cross the border illegally." Illegal immigrants should have to "wait in line here for citizenship behind everyone else," he said, but "we should not be splitting families."

A Cresitello supporter expressed the same philosophical dichotomy: "I don't think (immigration reform) is going to work," said Mary Anne Neggers of Morristown. "There are too many immigrants here."

While many of them are wonderful neighbors, Neggers said, "I'm afraid of the ones that are going to turn into felons. They're stealing. They're robbing....they're stacking..."

Two years ago, Neggers said, she found Hispanic immigrants "climbing all over my garage roof. They thought it was an apartment." She believed they were trying to break in around 11 p.m.

Another Morristown resident, Ed Ramirez, whose U.S. roots go back to California in the 1800s, insisted illegal immigrants give Hispanic-Americans a bad name.

"We are doing a disservice by letting them stay here" because they are taken advantage of by employers, landlords and vendors," Ramirez said. Plus, he said, "they do not respect our laws by coming here illegally."

Michael Pooler wanted to know "if 287(g) isn't the answer, then what is?"

As an African-American, he said, he knows only too well the long arm of the law.

"I don't know how many times, I've been pulled over. It's sad. This is America. I'm black."

WotS volunteer Kevin Dickson said it was sad to believe "that illegal immigrants are criminals, as if to say other populations are not. What about the crimes committed against them?"



Jamie Duffy Tim Dougherty, former Democrat councilman who is opposing Donald Cresitello in the mayoral primary, with Wind of the Spirit founder Diana Mejia and town councilwoman Michelle Harris-King, who is running on Dougherty's ticket.



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Jamie Duffy Panelists Ryan Stark
Lilienthal (L), Aarti Shahani and Sarahi Uribe



Jamie Duffy Father Hernan Arias, of St. Margaret of Scotland Church