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## Cresitello putting target on immigrant 'criminals'

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MORRISTOWN -- The mayor talked about a recent reduction in the number of day laborers who stand around waiting for contractors to give them jobs. Advertisement

"That would be quite an accomplishment, to make life more difficult for them," Donald Cresitello said.

Latino leaders talked about people moving out of town, claiming a slowdown of business along Speedwell Avenue.

"This is a new form of ethnic cleansing," said Martin Perez, president of the Latino Leadership of New Jersey.

The sometimes-nasty rhetoric continued this week, going both ways, with Latino organizations holding a press conference Wednesday to announce a report they issued on the immigration issue.

They were in Morristown because this has become the center of the debate, with Cresitello proposing the town enter a federal program that deputizes local police as federal immigration agents.

"The main thrust is to go after the criminal element," Cresitello said this week, perhaps in an effort to change the tone of the debate.

The problem is, he never just says that. He's gone on in the past to talk about people passing out drunk, apparently meaning some illegals who could be deported, and some Latinos considered that a slap at their community. He said something about jaywalkers possibly being subject to deportation.

That, he acknowledges, was a bad example.

"We would never use jaywalking to implement the program," he said this week, adding that jaywalkers are almost never ticketed. "I would consider that to be profiling."

He was still saying this week that if the ICE allows Morristown into the program, he'd like to target contractors who pick up day laborers and landlords who knowingly rent to illegal immigrants. He also acknowledged that the town would have to ask the federal government for permission to use the program that way.

"The government might say no," he said.

Officials with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, say the program has a specific purpose.

"The program is aimed at criminal activity, at those who are in the U.S. illegally and who have committed a crime which changes the fabric of the community they are living in," said Michael Gilhooly, a spokesman for ICE.

Cresitello said this week that it's up to his police chief, Pete Demnitz, to implement the program. Demnitz recently had been deferring questions to the mayor. He has been portrayed as opposing the program because he previously expressed concerns about the way it might be implemented. He said he was especially worried about victims of domestic violence being afraid to come to the police.

Demnitz said this week that people have a "misconception" that he opposes the program. He said he it would give police officers "another tool" to do something about criminal activity.

"I never opposed the mayor's plan," he said.

He pointed to the case of Porfirio Jimenez, charged in the 2001 stabbing and beating death of 10-year-old Walter Contreras Valenzuela. Jimenez was arrested twice by police in 1998 for incidents involving knives, Demnitz said. The ICE program,

Demnitz said, would have allowed police officers to charge Jimenez with immigration offenses.

"He would have been deported prior to the death of Walter Valenzuela," Demnitz said.

He said he wants people to know it will be safe for them to talk to police. He doesn't intend to arrest victims.

Latino leaders continued to portray the mayor as trying to get rid of them. Yet, Crestiello said he would have no problem with a program that leads to the legalization of some workers now here illegally. He said he has a problem only with illegal immigrants.

He is nothing if not blunt, and Latino leaders say some of the words he's chosen over the past month have divided the town.

Gov. Jon Corzine's office said on Wednesday that the governor reached out to Cresitello and opposes the mayor's proposal, saying it would lead to people distrusting the police. The day before, Cresitello said a "powerful politician" might try to stop him from implementing the program. He indicated that he's ready for a fight.

But it seems clear that he's helped fuel the opposition.

Latino leaders read back some of his quotes during Wednesday's press conference. Their problem wasn't simply the program Cresitello's been touting. They focused on his statements about the illegal immigrant community, on his talk of expanding the program even though it's not likely he'll be able to do that.

"We don't have any problems prosecuting criminals," Perez said.

That's what ICE officials say the program is all about. But Latinos say the mayor intends the program to be about more than just deporting the worst criminals and use terms such as "ethnic cleansing." Cresitello talks about making the lives of some illegals more difficult.

The program's possible merits get lost in that kind of debate.

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