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Clark County proposal embraces immigrants

WelcomeSpringfield.org group targets growing Latino population. Opponent says enforcement of laws will help local economy more.

NEWS

By Kermit Rowe

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Editor's note: The correct name and website for the initiative is WelcomeSpringfield.org not WelcomeSpringfield.com as previously reported.

Digging deeper

The Springfield News-Sun talked to nearly a dozen sources to address the important topic of immigration laws and how a local effort to welcome immigrants here could affect Clark County in the future.

By The Numbers

3,978: Clark County's Latino population in 2012

235: Percentage that Clark County's population has grown since 2000

10,000: Estimated number of Latinos in Clark County by 2050

* Based on U.S. Census numbers

A closer look at WelcomeSpringfield.com



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- Initial budget calls for \$6,500 for start-up and \$87,500 for additional first-year expenses
- Seeks to increase its budget to \$289,000 in 2015, \$368, 500 in 2016 and \$475,500 in 2017, mostly through grants and donations
- Seeks input from volunteers, schools and universities, governmental services, local businesses and civic organizations
- Areas of proposed service include education, justice, economic development, health and well-being, and culture and the arts
- Secondary functions include assisting local businesses that employ immigrants, advocacy, low-cost legal aid, instruction in financial literacy, marriage and family workshops, housing assistance and creating a Latino Business Incubator
- Sought-after outcomes include educational attainment, job success, home ownership, business start-ups, civic and community engagement and business start-ups
- Donations can be made through the Nehemiah Foundation

Source: WelcomeSpringfield.org proposal

A new Clark County initiative that targets immigrants will address declining population and job losses by embracing and enabling the area's growing Latino population, its founder said.

One opponent, however, called the plan 'a poverty magnet' that will not succeed.

The nonprofit initiative is called WelcomeSpringfield.org, and its executive director and founder, Carl Ruby, said it will revitalize the county's economy.

"Our goal is to bring money into Clark County and to aggressively go after grants that will help us to serve this population and to revitalize and rebuild the economy," said Ruby, a South Charleston resident and former administrator at Cedarville University. "Ours is not a charitable organization — it's not set up to give out handouts but to give a person a hand up."



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“We think we should welcome this and use it to revitalize the economy,” Ruby said.

Clark County’s population declined by 20,000 people since 1970 and is projected fall 10,000 more by 2040, according to census numbers and the Ohio Department of Development.

“One way to mitigate losing those 10,000 people is to not just recruit immigrants, but give them the skills to be homeowners and business owners,” he said. “It’s not just recruiting immigrants, but recruiting immigrants who are eager to work hard.”

Recruiting immigrants draws passionate opposition.

“To me this proposal, in an economic sense, is a poverty magnet,” said Steve Salvi, founder of the Ohio Jobs and Justice PAC. Its website describes the PAC as “a non-partisan educational civil rights and advocacy organization focusing on important public policy issues” and lists immigration as one of the two most important.

“This is not a demographic that is going to revitalize Springfield or any community in Clark County,” Salvi said. “As soon as you institute these types of things, it will draw more illegal aliens, and they won’t have PhDs. They are largely uneducated. How is this going to help the economy of Springfield?”

Unlike the controversial Welcome Dayton initiative, which brands Dayton as an immigrant-friendly city and started as a government movement, Ruby hopes WelcomeSpringfield.org will thrive through funding received from grants and donations.

“... We are seeking to build a strong alliance with city and county government officials, because this can’t succeed without it,” he said.

He also knows the initiative also can’t succeed without funding.

“I think they’ll buy into it, because there’s a lot of common sense involved,” said Ruby of prospective supporters. “It’s also very broad-based, so it will appeal to a lot of groups.”

WelcomeSpringfield.com initiative would provide services involving economic development, justice, health and well-being, culture and arts, and education. Ruby already has a partner in the educational



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“We’re trying to set up for the future,” said Iony Ortiz, president of the initiative’s board, who was named Associate Vice President for Latino Affairs at Wright State University in October. Ortiz serves on Gov. John Kasich’s Commission on Hispanic/Latino Affairs and with the Ohio Commission of Hispanic Latino Affairs and is past president of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

As changes in the immigration law come about, “We want be prepared to meet the needs of the people who are here already and those who can and will come,” Ortiz said. “They are out there and they have a lot to offer.”

Wright State seeks innovation, Ortiz said, and connects people with needs to the school’s resources.

“We want to do research on best practices. We have a group of folks who are very interested in this kind of research,” he said. “But my stand on immigration is mine, not the university’s.”

Ruby sees the initiative as a part of a regional effort.

“What we’re attempting to do is to establish a reputation in this region as being one of the most proactive in trying to attract the type of businesses that attract immigrants and enable them to succeed,” he said. “If they work hard, they deserve to take a shot at the American dream.”

Ruby has spoken with many Clark County leaders about the initiative.

Among them is Clark County Commissioner John Detrick.

“Throughout the history of Clark County, we’d had growth through immigration, whether it was the Irish coming in or the Germans coming in,” said Detrick. “This is the avenue for a community to stay healthy, by attracting immigrants, and this program sounds really exciting.

“That’s what you have to do, think out of box,” he continued. “The main issue in Clark County is a slightly declining population. I’ve been wrestling with it for 18 years. This is one way to address it, and the other way is jobs. And immigrants will come here if we have jobs.”

Springfield City Manager Jim Bodenmiller said he will watch developments closely.



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Bodenmiller said he thinks the initiative can be successful. “I just think of some of our local people who came over or whose parents came over, and they are some of the most successful people in our community. Jim Lagos for example; his is a pretty neat family story,” he said.

Springfield Mayor Warren Copeland knows a problem exists here.

“One of my concerns is that we need to find out a way to basically bring these folks out into the open instead of hiding in the shadows,” he said. “We have a number of folks who are here, and some are not here legally, and that is a problem.

“My own personal view is we need to find ways to get these folks legal status so that they can come out of the shadows and we can relate to them like we do the rest of our residents.”

Ted Vander Roest, Springfield Foundation executive director, says there is little organized help for this part of the population in Clark County.

“I think it’s a void that needs to be filled,” said Vander Roest. “Several years ago, we had a couple of organizations that were active in that area, but they disappeared. With the growing population, it’s a need. And it’s a challenge.”

Others, like Clark County Commissioner Rick Lohnes and Springfield Tea Party leader John Shutway, said they knew little about WelcomeSpringfield.org but wanted to speak more in-depth with Ruby about it. Ruby realizes his initiative speaks to a hot-button issue in America.

“Anytime you take on anything like this, there is going to be some push-back,” said Ruby. “When people step back and look at what our situation is economically and what has happened to our population, it is hard to argue with numbers. When they look at what it has cost us, it tends to change their perspective.”

Ruby said some of the loudest voices against immigration reform base their feelings on inaccurate economic information.

“The heart of the opposition is a perception that they are coming to take advantage of our generous welfare system,” Ruby said. “The facts don’t bear that out; instead they say that they come to work.”

Statistics show immigrants don’t take jobs from Americans, he said.



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Added Boddenmiller: “I hose things are heavily charged politically, but that’s based on worst-case stories. If you break it down to an individual level, it’s just someone trying to catch a break and make a way for his family, making a better life for themselves. We’re all kind of about that, I think.”

Salvi sees it differently and proposes a different solution.

“If the people of Clark County and Springfield are smart, they would decrease the population of people who are going to bring down the population of Springfield,” he said. “A good percentage of them aren’t supposed to be here anyway, it’s against the law.”

WelcomeSpringfield.org will help won’t help citizens of Springfield and Clark County, Salvi said.

“The natives will move out, and that is your tax base, and (the population) will be replenished with a bunch of poor people,” he said. “What are you going to do then, call up the government and ask for money?”

Salvi said immigration reform is a hot issue because it has been historically mishandled in America.

“I don’t dislike these people,” he said. “The U.S. allows more legal immigration than any country in the world. But work through that system to improve your community, not through people who are breaking the law.”

Visiting the roots of a similar historic issue is what initially moved Ruby to action.

“I had a defining experience a couple of years ago when I took a civil rights bus trip,” said Ruby. The experience, which focused on Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights movement, left Ruby with a haunting question: “If I would have lived during that time, what would I have done?”

“Regardless of what people think about immigration, there are still people trapped in the system through no fault of their own who are paying a price for its brokenness.”

It’s also a big job.

“I believe it holds tremendous potential for Clark County,” he said. “We are a nation of immigrants.



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