

Minutemen Speak

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By Tom Mitchell

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Youths display banners in English and Spanish protesting views by the Virginia Chapter of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, which hosted last night's forum on the issue of illegal immigration and its impact on communities in the U.S.

Photo by Michael Reilly

HARRISONBURG – At last night's meeting of the Virginia Chapter of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, the issue of illegal immigration proved as divisive as the national borders that serve as a source for the controversial subject.

Speakers for and against illegal refugees addressed an equally split audience of more than 100 people in a forum held at the Ramada Inn.

The gathering was part of a series of meetings that the state's Minuteman chapter is holding throughout the Commonwealth in an effort to give the matter of illegal immigration attention, said George A. Taplin, director of the state chapter in Herndon. The purpose of such assemblies, said Taplin, is to help communities deal with problems caused by illegal immigration. Immigrants who come to the U.S. without proper documentation are illegal, said Taplin.

Taplin's chapter formed in 2005 to oppose town officials in the Fairfax County community who refused to address the topic of illegal immigration.

Besides Taplin, the forum consisted of two others who spoke out against illegal immigration: Bill Buchanan, a legislative representative for American Council for Immigration Reform in Washington, D.C., and Joyce Mucci, southern field representative for the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

The forum also included two people opposed to immigration reform: Sam Nickels, cultural competency coordinator for New Bridges Immigrant Resource Center in the city and Rick Casteneda, chairman for the Harrisonburg Area Hispanic Services Council.

"I am not against immigrants, but I am very opposed to illegal immigrants," said Taplin. "If you're going to come to here [to the U.S.], do it the right way."

Immigrant Victims

Taplin said that illegal refugees not only contribute to crime and rising costs for community resources, but that such unlawful arrivals are themselves victimized by companies that seek cheap labor and, accordingly, exploit illegal immigrants by paying them substandard wages.

"Businesses here have created a 'slave economy,'" said Taplin.

Nickels, who credits New Bridges with helping refugees find services when they arrive in the area, blamed opposition to immigrants on public "myths" that portray newcomers from other nations as people to take jobs from Americans. Nickels said that a biased media often portrays immigrants as criminals. Nickels cited stories in the DN-R that upheld his view.

"Studies show that immigrants, as a whole, have a lower incarceration rate than the average American population," said Nickels.

Those who attended the forum spoke vehemently, if in opposition, on the question of illegal immigrants.

Robert T. Monger, 58, from Mount Crawford, thinks that governments at all levels in the U.S. must address the issue of illegal immigration, which Monger calls "a problem" for communities.

"A law is a law," said Monger, a former electrical foreman who is disabled. "The Bible says to obey the law. Plus, [illegal immigrants] come here and get free medical care and we can't."

Laura Rogers, 19, from Leesburg, took a different view, insisting that the Virginia Minuteman group speaks only for part of society.

Rogers, a freshman sociology major at James Madison University, defended those with compassion for immigrants, legal or illegal.

Said Rogers: "It's about human beings."