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California city votes on immigration issue

USA TODAY.com

By Martin Kasindorf, USA TODAY

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Landlords who rent to illegal immigrants could face \$1,000 fines, and homeowners who hire undocumented workers could have their cars impounded under a measure being voted on today by the San Bernardino City Council.

A group opposed to illegal immigration in the city of 200,000, located 70 miles east of Los Angeles, collected more than 2,200 signatures to force the council to consider the tough proposal. If the council doesn't approve the measure today, the issue will go to voters on a citywide ballot.

Four of the seven council members said in interviews that they expected the measure to fail today because of concerns over enforcement costs and court challenges. "Cops don't need to be checking under mattresses to see if some landlord is renting to some illegal immigrant," Councilman Dennis Baxter said. "We have bigger fish to fry: crime, gang activity. Whoever is cutting the next-door neighbors' lawn is a lower priority."

Joseph Turner, 29, who led the petition drive, said the city charter would mandate a special election by September. The financially strained city will try to shift the ballot measure to November's general election to save the \$300,000 cost of a special election, Councilman Neil Derry said.

Turner said he wants the proposal approved before November "so I can have a potential impact on the November election throughout this country. It might embolden candidates to be more aggressive on the immigration issue, and we can get more representation."

The measure would be the most far-reaching crackdown on illegal immigration by any U.S. city, Turner said. As Congress considers legislation on the issue, some cities are getting tough on illegal immigrants while others are offering refuge.

Costa Mesa, Calif., recently ordered police to check suspected felons' immigration status. Cambridge, Mass., and California's Maywood and Coachella have declared themselves "sanctuaries" where police don't check papers.

States are wading into the controversy, too. Colorado Gov. Bill Owens, a Republican, signed into law May 1 a bill prohibiting sanctuary cities. Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, a Republican, last month signed a measure requiring officials to verify the legal status of people seeking many state benefits.

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Nearly half of San Bernardino's population is Hispanic, Census figures show. Turner, an aide to a Republican member of the California Legislature, said a victory for his group would "put to bed the myth that a Latino backlash will hurt the Republican Party if it fights illegal immigration."

Armando Navarro, coordinator of the National Alliance for Human Rights, a coalition of Hispanic activist groups, said, "We are going to mobilize large numbers of people" to defeat the measure. He called it "heinous and racist."

An election would be "very close," Derry said. Councilman Chas Kelley said voters wouldn't be thinking about the high cost of enforcing the measure. "They just want something done about this issue."

Kelley said the measure "makes sense" and he'll vote for it today to avoid an election. Baxter said the city is trying to find money for 40 more police officers and can't afford the measure: "Does Joseph Turner think this is Beverly Hills?"

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