

A day after massive marches nationwide, opponents of a day labor center win a majority on a Virginia Town Council

By Willem Marx, Times Staff Writer

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HERNDON, Va. — The results of Tuesday's Town Council elections in this small suburban community could serve as a powerful admonition to politicians across the country who favor greater rights for illegal immigrants, according to some residents and local officials.

Herndon has been in the national spotlight over a dispute about the town's use of public funds for a facility that helps day laborers, many of whom are in the United States illegally, find employment.

Opponents of the center captured the mayor's office and four council seats Tuesday, giving them a solid majority on the town's governing body.

Built with county funding and operated by a charity called Project Hope and Harmony, the center consists of a corrugated beige prefab building with a scattering of picnic tables, where workers wait at dawn to be hired.

Organizations that had fought the center were celebrating the election results Wednesday.

Residents and businesspeople who favor expanding rights for illegal immigrants said they thought recent local and national demonstrations had irreparably harmed their candidates and the wider debate.

The center has been a prime target of the Minuteman Project, the controversial citizens' group that came to prominence by setting up its own patrols along the U.S.-Mexico border. The organization established a branch in Herndon, and its national president, Chris Simcox, issued a warning Wednesday.

"Politicians across the country should take note of the results of this election," he said in a written statement. "The central issue of this referendum vote was illegal immigration and elitist politicians ignoring the will of the American people for their own special interests. The voters of Herndon, Va., sent a clear message to their city officials: 'You're fired.'"

Reelected Councilman Dennis D. Husch, who campaigned against the center, was optimistic that similar grass-roots movements against illegal immigration would prevail.

"I would like to think we've given hope to all those who are not satisfied with the situation. The federal government has let us down," he said, warning of a backlash in November's congressional elections for those favoring greater rights for illegal

immigrants. “Come November, they better be clear about their position, or they’ll be sitting at home come Jan. 1.”

J. Harlon Reece, the only council member who kept his seat despite his vote for the center, said he was concerned about the election’s wider ramifications.

“I think it makes it harder for politicians to do what they think is best for their community,” he said. “There were folks who were really frustrated with the national situation and took it out on us.”

A group called Help Save Herndon, which opposes the use of public money to aid illegal immigrants in the town, issued a release Wednesday calling the election results a “devastating defeat” for “those who believe in the aiding and abetting of illegal aliens.”

“If it can happen in Herndon, it can happen anywhere,” the group said.

Legal immigrants saw in the vote indications that recent protests had harmed the cause of immigration. Petros Kontos, who left a small Greek island for America at 17, runs a diner on Elden Street, in the heart of Herndon.

He said many illegal immigrants had destroyed the opportunity for reasonable debate, arguing that “people were very supportive, or at least kept quiet, until those big rallies started all over the country.”

The repercussions of the Herndon election reached Capitol Hill, where Don Stewart, a spokesman for Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas), said the results “certainly grabbed people’s attention.”

“The bigger issue is a disconnect with constituents, which some are saying a lot of politicians have with immigration nationwide,” he added.

Some Herndon residents are concerned not just about a political disconnect, but about a division between citizens over the immigration issue.

Akhter Bakker, a legal immigrant who manages the Supper Club of India restaurant, said he feared that an anti-immigration backlash, starting in Herndon, would spread across the country because the issue had been so publicized.

“It has created a difference,” he said, “a solid difference, a wall of communication.”

The illegal immigrants campaigning for citizens’ rights “have drawn a line; otherwise it could have been resolved amicably,” he said.