

Impact of immigrant marches uncertain

By Leslie Berestein
STAFF WRITER

April 15, 2007

SAN DIEGO – On the grassy lawn where Balboa Park meets Laurel Street, the city's largest-ever-recorded public rally kicked off a year ago April 9, with upward of 50,000 people joining a massive pro-immigrant march.

It was one of several large rallies nationwide last spring, with hundreds of thousands marching in support of wide-ranging changes in immigration law.

On Tuesday, a day after the San Diego march's anniversary, about 50 members of community and religious groups that helped organize last year's march gathered on the lawn at the entrance to the park. They had initially planned a commemorative rally.

Instead, they held a news conference to decry a recent series of immigration enforcement sweeps. The changes they rallied for last year – including a path to citizenship for people already working in the United States illegally – are not in sight.

“It seems like we are always reacting,” the Rev. Patricia Andrews-Callori, president of the faith-based group Justice Overcoming Boundaries, said afterward.

A year after the unprecedented marches made national headlines, organizers of the local rally and others observing the immigration debate have mixed feelings about where last year's surge of activism has led.

Many credit the activity with derailing last year's enforcement-only legislation, though a supporter of immigration restrictions said all it did was stall Congress on the issue.

Some in the pro-immigration movement hope the spirit from last year's rallies will lead to more Latino votes in coming elections. Others say the momentum from the marches has dissipated, with debates occurring over tactics and what kind of immigration legislation is needed.

Last year's rallies grew out of public reaction to HR 4437, legislation approved by the House of Representatives in late 2005 that would have made it a felony to be in the country illegally, something that is now a civil offense.

The legislation did not become law.

“That is one of the victories of last year,” said Norma Chavez-Peterson, director of Justice Overcoming Boundaries and an organizer of last year's march. “What came out of the Senate was not perfect, but it was not as bad as 4437.”

Effect on voting

Preliminary exit poll data from the 2006 general election showed an increase in Latino voter participation nationwide, according to the William C. Velasquez Institute, a nonpartisan public policy analysis organization based in San Antonio.

It's hard to pinpoint how much is due to last year's activism, said Lydia Camarillo of the Southwest Voter Registration Project, a San Antonio group affiliated with the institute. However, she said she believes the youth involvement seen last

year, when teens in San Diego and elsewhere walked out of school to march, will have a lasting political impact.

“By 2010, those young people will be of age and will be registered and participating,” she said.

The institute projects as many as 12 million Latinos nationwide will be registered to vote by next year's general election, compared with 9.3 million registered during the 2004 general election.

Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C., said it's not known yet what effect there has been on voter participation. But there has been another kind of political impact in the nation's capital.

Unlike last year's HR 4437, a plan introduced last month in the House by Reps. Luis V. Gutierrez, D-Ill., and Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., combines enforcement measures with a guest worker plan, a path to citizenship and changes to the visa system.

Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington-based group that favors immigration restrictions, said the marches did more to stall Congress than anything else.

“I think it actually backfired,” said Krikorian, who said he doubts reforms will be enacted this year. “It represented hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens demanding amnesty, which got a lot of people's hackles up.”

Boycott tactic

In the meantime, grass-roots organizers in San Diego and elsewhere remain optimistic, collecting signatures for petitions, engaging in letter-writing campaigns and planning events, among them a second nationwide boycott May 1, planned by a Los Angeles-based group.

During the run-up to last year's May 1 boycott – which affected some sectors of the economy but fell short of organizers' expectations – cracks in the solidarity displayed during the marches began to show. Some organizations that endorsed the marches, including church groups and organized labor, spoke out against the boycott. In San Diego, organizers held an after-work rally May 1 at Balboa Park.

Today, groups remain divided over tactics and desired changes to immigration laws. Some grass-roots groups want blanket amnesty and reject a guest worker proposal, while large organizations such as the National Council of La Raza favor a guest worker plan.

These divisions, coupled with dissatisfaction over the fact that no pro-immigrant laws were enacted last year, have slowed the momentum seen last spring, said Armando Navarro, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of California Riverside.

“We are not as organized as we were last year,” said Navarro, who helped orchestrate rallies and community meetings. “After May, there was no strategy to speak of.”

Navarro said he was disappointed to see only around 1,200 people at a rally in San Bernardino last month. Recent rallies elsewhere, including in Los Angeles, where half a million marched last year, have drawn far-smaller crowds.

The apparent slowdown has not dampened everyone's spirits, though.

“Have we had the end result? No,” said San Diego activist Enrique Morones of Border Angels, a group that sets up water stations in the desert. “Because social change takes time.”

■Leslie Berestein: (619) 542-4579; leslie.berestein@uniontrib.com

Find this article at:

http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20070415/news_1m15march.html