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Cresitello renews call for local immigration enforcement

Morristown mayor says plan can work

BY MINHAJ HASSAN
DAILY RECORD

MORRISTOWN -- Mayor Donald Cresitello is a man of strong, clear convictions on prickly town issues:

- On illegal immigrants in town: "I want tomorrow morning a bill passed that provides a pathway to legalization, but not citizenship, since they did jump the borders."
- On President Bush's failed comprehensive immigration plan: "I think it was fraud on his part."
- On redevelopment in town: "It is about future tax needs. It's about rebirth. We need to revitalize the area. We need sources of revenue."
- On empowering some town police to enforce federal immigration laws: "It's intended to deal with felons. ... It absolutely would have prevented the murder of those three children (recently murdered in Newark)."
- On his political future: He doesn't plan to run for re-election in 2009.

In a wide ranging interview with the Daily Record editorial board Friday, Cresitello talked at length about these topics -- and about former Morris Freeholder and now U.S. Attorney Chris Christie.

A federal case

Christie told this newspaper two weeks ago that the mayor was "grandstanding" at the ProAmerica Society immigration rally held in front of town hall on South Street on July 28. Rally leaders opposed illegal immigration.

While the mayor said he personally likes Christie, especially for his pursuit of corrupt politicians, Cresitello said he disagrees with the federal attorney's assertion that he never tried to contact Christie's office to discuss illegal immigration.

Cresitello said it has come up when they have crossed paths at the Morristown Diner.

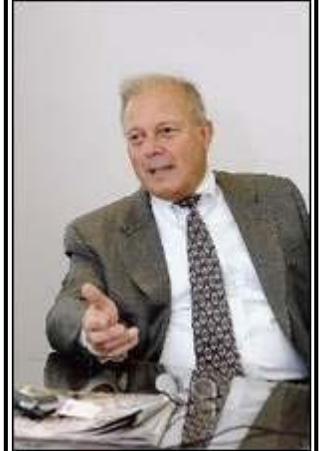
The mayor insists he has had several discussions with Christie about prosecuting illegal immigrants for felonies, contrary to what Christie said two weeks ago.

"He said, 'Bring me the cases,'" Cresitello said. "I was a bit annoyed that he told the newspaper that he didn't have a discussion with me. I'm telling you I had that conversation with him."

The mayor said he sent a four-page letter to Christie on Friday, which Cresitello said defines existing federal laws that Christie could prosecute right now, outside of the 287G program, which can authorize municipal police to go after immigration violations. Cresitello said he wants the federal prosecutor's office to form a task force with the town police department and town administration to enforce all immigration violation laws. Those laws include prohibitions against contractors hiring illegal aliens, and against landlords permitting overcrowding or stacking.

Cresitello said Morristown cannot now prosecute such cases in municipal court as criminal violations, but only as civil penalties.

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Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello discusses redevelopment, illegal immigration and recent comments by U.S. Attorney Chris Christie in a conversation with the Daily Record.

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Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello says illegal immigrants should be given a clear path to legalization, but not citizenship..

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Christie was off for the week and was not available for comment.

Policing illegals

The mayor has gained widespread attention for his controversial stance on illegal immigration by applying to a program provided by the Department of Homeland Security's office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in which police officers are deputized to enforce immigration law.

The 287G program "more than likely will be approved for the town of Morristown," even though there will be a moratorium temporarily placed on the program for unknown reasons, Cresitello said. He said Morristown's application has been grandfathered, and he said he'll probably hear from federal officials at the end of September. Training for the six of the town's 58 police officers who be in the program would take place in October.

Under the plan, police officers would have access to a database to check on a suspect's legal status, criminal history, fingerprints and other details. He added the program is not intended for random roundups.

"It's intended to deal with felons. It's intended to (prevent) exactly what happened in Essex County," Cresitello said, referring to the execution-style murders of three college students in a Newark school yard. The prime suspect, Jose Carranza, 28, of Peru, had previously been involved in a sexual assault and his immigration status was never checked. Lack of or little communication took place between local police and immigration enforcement officials, largely because there aren't rules requiring such collaboration.

A 15 year-old town boy who lives on Garden Street and who was linked to the MS-13, a notorious Salvadoran street gang, is also a suspect in the fatal shooting.

"It absolutely would have prevented the murder of those three children," the Morristown mayor said.

About the rallies

Cresitello said he asked organizer Robb Pearson to not hold the ProAmerica Society rally. But keeping consistent with a longtime tradition, he showed up at the event.

"We never stopped people from having rallies. It's been tradition in Morristown," he said, adding a KKK rally took place several years ago.

Seeing other speakers there, whom he didn't feel were out of line, Cresitello said he decided to speak.

"I was extremely upset by the (counter-demonstration) group across the street that couldn't respect the opportunity to honor the country and the flag and the opportunity to honor the troops. They just kept chanting as loud as they could," the mayor said. He said his earlier reference to the counter-demonstrators as "communists and Marxists" was a response to what he saw, from the slogans they were chanting, and the flags and signs they were holding up.

Immigration reform

The mayor said President Bush's ill-fated attempt to have legislation on comprehensive immigration passed was disingenuous. "I think it was fraud on his part," Cresitello said in Friday's interview.

Cresitello suggested his own immigration bill idea.

"I want tomorrow morning a bill passed that provides a pathway to legalization, but not citizenship, since they did jump the borders," said Cresitello, who said he doesn't plan to run for re-election in 2009. "You have civil rights when you cross the border, but you're still a criminal under federal law."

Under such a plan, he said, such individuals could work here for three years, pay a fine, and learn to speak English.

Cresitello said the problem of illegal immigrants -- who, he said, make up about 1,500 of the 19,000 people living in Morristown -- has grown rampant. Once mostly confined to commercial centers, the problems caused and crimes committed by some of them have spread to residential neighborhoods, including his own, he said. Such problems include prostitution, home break-ins, stacking and gang activity, the mayor said.

He believes many of the illegal immigrants are from Honduras, Guatemala and Russia, among other places.

Redevelopment's role

Cresitello said in the two years he has left as mayor, he wants to continue moving forward on the nearly \$750 million worth of redevelopment projects throughout the town.

"All contracts should be executed by the end of the year," he said.

Cresitello said there may be two other projects yet to come, but he can't make them public yet.

He said Speedwell Avenue -- where there's a major mixed-use project planned, calling for up 800 residential units and 50,000 square feet of commercial space -- presently has several old, wooden buildings not consistent with building codes. Redeveloping such areas is necessary to provide more revenues to the town, he said.

"It is about future tax needs. It's about rebirth," he said. "We need to revitalize the area. We need sources of revenue."

All together, the redevelopment projects should bring in about \$8 million annually in property tax revenues.

In the Speedwell project, Cresitello said, there could be as many as 160 to 180 affordable housing units, and he may also seek another 5 percent for "middle income" residents.

The 'elected official'

With more than 30 years in local politics, Cresitello acknowledges that he likes being a lightning rod at times. He prefers to be known as an elected official instead of a politician. He said he is able to implement his vision by surrounding himself with a highly professional staff and seeking its guidance.

"The reason I think I'm a good mayor is because I have very good people around me," he said referring to town lawyers and engineers. "In order for me to accomplish what I want, I need to have the best around me."

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