

MAKE AMERICA ENGLISH AGAIN

A trio of citizen initiatives takes aim at Oregon's immigrant population

By Mohammed Alkhadher

THE current Republican front-runner has vowed, if elected president, he will build a wall along America's southern border, claiming its construction would be done at Mexico's expense.

Donald Trump has accused Mexico of "sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us."

The presumptive Republican nominee also accused a community that makes up 12.5 percent of Oregon's population and 17.4 percent of the nation's population of "bringing drugs" in his 2015 presidential announcement speech. "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."

More recently, Trump accused the judge in the lawsuit against Trump University of bias against him due to the judge's Mexican heritage.

While blatantly pinning blame on the Latino community and other immigrant populations for America's crime rate and economic problems sparked national controversy, some Oregonians are attempting to carry the rhetoric over to the state level through the state's initiative petition process. Anti-immigrant groups are building a virtual wall of their own, trying to cloak hate and bigotry under the guise of reducing government and lowering costs.

The right-wing group Oregonians for Immigration Reform and Republican Rep. Mike Nearman have pitched Initiative Petitions 40 and 52 — proposals aiming to make English the official language of the state and to require employers to use the federal E-Verify system. Nearman is also sponsoring IP 51, which would increase barriers to voter registration.

Pro-immigrant groups are rallying to beat these petitions before they make it onto the ballot by pointing out their racist and divisive undertones.

Speak English or die

The initiative process allows the state's citizens to propose laws or amendments to Oregon's Constitution, as well as to adopt or reject bills passed by the state's Legislature in the general elections. If the chief petitioners gather the required number of signatures, the initiative is placed on the ballot this November.

In the past, this process has legalized marijuana, but it has also hampered the rights of Oregonians — a 2004 ballot measure banned gay marriage for a decade until it was overturned in 2014 by a federal judge. Also in 2014, Oregon voters decided against allowing undocumented citizens to obtain drivers licenses via Measure 88.

Andrea Miller, executive director of Causa, an immigration rights organization, says her group has organized a coalition to combat these initiatives. "From the coalition's perspective, these initiatives are very negative and are against Oregon's values

of trying to reach equity and equality for all communities," Miller says, "and instead try to project values very similar to Trump's values."

IP 40 proposes to make English the official language of Oregon, requiring state-run agencies to provide services in English regardless of the affected person's proficiency with the language, and would forbid government officials from communicating in any language other than English while on the job.

According to a study by the American Psychological Association, racist attitudes are the impetus behind the English-only movement in the U.S.

Oregon adopted an English Plus policy in 1989, by way of Senate Joint Resolution 16, which legislated that "the use of diverse languages in business, government and private affairs, and the presence of diverse cultures is welcomed, encouraged and protected in Oregon."

Miller says of IP 40, "It would limit government's ability to provide service and information in languages other than English."

Rep. Nearman says that 31 states have legislation that make English their official language and that he believes anyone born and raised in the United States should be able to speak the language.

In other words, mothers who don't speak English seeking assistance in feeding their families at the Department of Human Services wouldn't be able to get help accessing the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, more commonly referred to as food stamps.

"Could you imagine the DHS or DMV as English-only zones?" Carrasco asks. "Taking away the language is the last blow of colonialism."

In addition, Nearman says this won't have any affect on the private sector. The initiative would also eradicate any positions requiring that government employees speak languages other than English.

"There's a lot of positions that get hired for where they require personnel to speak a language other than English and that get very expensive to have [as a] requirement," Nearman says. "So it would save the state of Oregon a lot of money."