

BURBLLING TENSION

Framingham finds residents taking sides over a Town Meeting vote pressing for the immigration status of adult ESL students

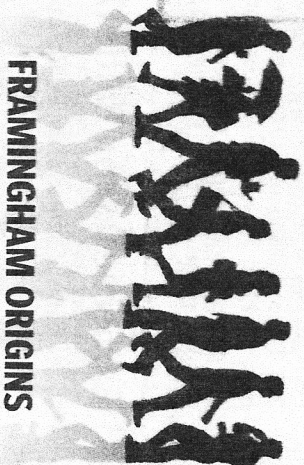
By Deirdre Ferrandes

GLOBE STAFF

Tuesday morning the classrooms and the main hall at the New Life Presbyterian Community Church in downtown Framingham were filled with Brazilian, Russian, and Chinese immigrants translating simple words from their native language into English, learning how to use superlatives, and polishing their questions for an upcoming game that will use American baseball legend Jackie Robinson as its theme.

Framingham's adult English as a Second Language programs, which are held mornings and evenings, are in such high demand that the waiting list stretches into the hundreds. But these classes have also become a lightning rod in a local debate about illegal immigration that has divided Framingham, even as Congress considers reforms to the country's immigration laws.

In a 51-49 vote earlier this month, Town Meeting members decided to ask selectmen to verify the immigration status of participants in adult ESL classes. In a town where more



FRAMINGHAM ORIGINS

TOWN POPULATION

67,844
Total

17,737
Foreign-born

PLACE OF BIRTH OF FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS

1,872
Europe

4,269
Asia

10,585
Latin America

1,011
Other areas

STATUS OF FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS

6,431
Naturalized US citizen

11,306

were born in another country, and downtown shops display Brazilian flags and sell Guatemalan breads, the vote on the nonbinding resolution has puzzled some residents, angered others, and served as a notice to Framingham officials that immigration is a local issue as much as a national debate.

English classes help immigrants assimilate into the United States, and should not be restricted to those with the proper papers, according to Pablo Maia, a Framingham Town Meeting member who is of Brazilian descent.

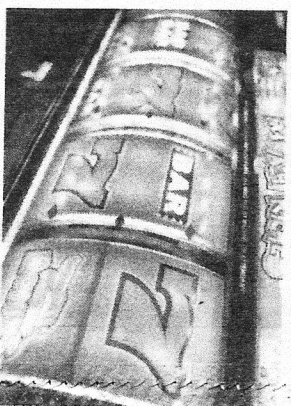
"If you don't speak English, you're out of the social area," Maia said. "It's very dangerous."

Maia said he and his family have been happy living in Framingham for the past eight years, but the town needs a study committee to help residents understand the complexities and the human faces behind the immigration issue.

"People think that just because they're immigrants they're living off the government," Maia said. "That's not true."

But supporters of the Town Meeting vote say the community's limited

according to chairman Leslie Fox. "We asked people in town to let us SLOTS PARLOR, Page 8



JACOB KEPLER/BLOOMBERG/FILE

A Maryland company is proposing to use the local Holiday Inn site for a slot-machine parlor.

ASHLAND

Ex-chief runs for selectman

Says forced exit won't impede cooperation

By John Swinoneck

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Scott Rohmer said last week that if he is elected to the Board of Selectmen he would have no problem working with the new town manager, Anthony Schiavi, who last month ended Rohmer's career as Ashland's police chief.

"We're professionals," Rohmer said after a candidates forum. "There's checks and balances. I'm a professional person, that's just the way I am."

Rohmer said he decided to run for selectman within 24 hours after Schiavi, saying the department had lost the public's trust, placed the chief on paid administrative leave and announced the town would not be...

Vote asks town to verify ESL students' immigration status

►FRAMINGHAM
Continued from Page 1

resources should not be spent on those who arrived or stayed in America through back channels.

"The bottom line is that it's all about fairness," said Audrey Hall, chairwoman of Town Meeting's Ways and Means Committee, which sponsored the resolution. "Our country has a bigger issue to deal with and it's been a struggle to deal with. On a small scale, if we have a program that is meant for people who are legal immigrants... they should be a priority."

Dennis Giombetti, chairman of the Board of Selectmen, said he was surprised that the measure passed, especially with the backdrop of congressional efforts on immigration reform.

But the close vote likely reflects the national mood on the issue, Giombetti said. "I think Framingham is not that different than most communities."

After Town Meeting ends, the selectmen will study the recommendation and determine whether Framingham needs to or can check immigration papers for participants in its ESL program, Giombetti said.

"It's a confusing topic, it's a sensitive topic," said Town Manager Robert Halpin. "There's a lot of related legal and policy questions."

The Rev. Volmar Scaravelli, pastor at St. Tarcisus Church

ter, expressed disappointment with the resolution. The largest majority of the town's foreign-born residents, about 35 percent or 6,202 people, are from Brazil, according to the most recent census figures.

"It's good for our town that people learn to speak English," Scaravelli said through a translator. He added that it helps parents educate their children and adults navigate a new culture. "That's what they need most, is to speak English."

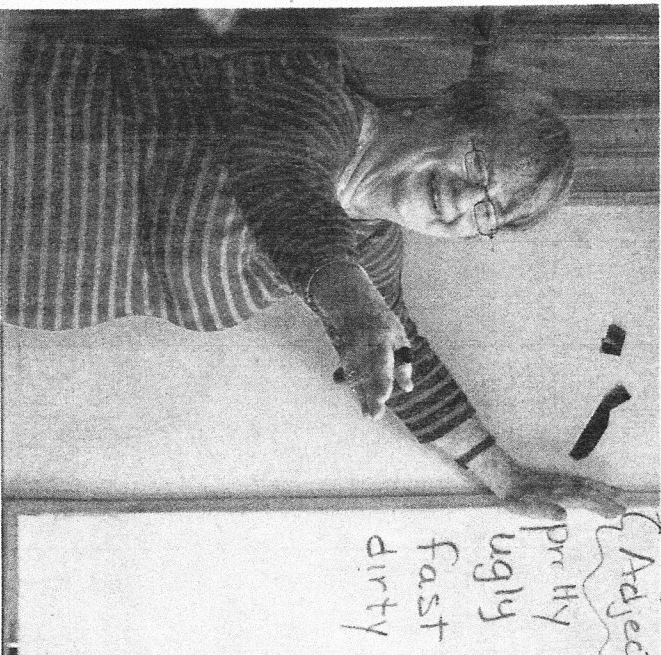
Specifically at issue is how the town administers a federal Community Development Block Grant that helps pay for the English classes. Two groups get money annually from the grant. The Framingham ESL Plus program, run through the school district, receives \$20,500, and Literacy Volunteers of America gets \$11,500, Halpin said.

Framingham ESL Plus is the largest program in the community. The federal grant is a small part of its \$800,000 annual budget and pays for about 30 student slots, said Christine Tibor, the program's director.

Most of the funding for the 700 adults served annually by the program comes from the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Tibor said.

Participants are accepted through a lottery system.

Last year, after a complaint from residents Jim and Joe Rizoli, brothers who founded Concerned Citizens and



DINA RUDECK/GLOBE STAFF

Instructor Lee Ann Friedman seeks an answer from a participant in an English as Second Language class.

participants who took seats paid for by the federal grant about their residency status.

Under federal law, participants benefiting from the grant money must be citizens or legal residents of the country. Framingham ESL Plus does not ask for documentation to verify the answers.

Because the Town Meeting resolution seems tied to the federal grant and those answering the legal immigrant question, Tibor said, it is unlikely to reduce the waiting list of about 400 students or have a

"It appears that there's a criteria and it doesn't appear that the criteria is being enforced," Hall said.

If the intent of Town Meeting is that Framingham should ask all adult ESL students about their immigration status and verify that information, that should involve more discussion and include state education officials, Tibor said.

"That's part of a much bigger conversation," she said. "We're in the business of teaching English... we're not set up for that."

Joe Rizoli said he hopes the May 1 vote sent a signal to Framingham officials that residents want them to scrutinize the immigration status of people who receive town services. He said he would also like to see the selectmen ask business owners who apply for town permits whether they hire only documented workers.

The Southern Poverty Law Center in 2008 called the Rizolis' organization a hate group, and a year later the Anti-Defamation League described Jim Rizoli as "Holocaust denier" and an "anti-Semite" for remarks he made during an episode of the brothers' local cable-access television show. The Rizolis have disputed both accusations.

Both brothers were members of Town Meeting until last month, when they did not win reelection. Jim Rizoli, who could not be reached for comment, had been a member of

measure in the past, Joe Rizoli said.

"They would have never known this was going on if it weren't for us," he said.

Some supporters of the resolution have distanced themselves from the Rizolis.

Kathy Vassar, a 40-year resident of Framingham, said she supported the resolution because she would like the town, if possible, to give preference to legal immigrants. The resolution is not about being opposed to immigrants, she said.

"I think there is a huge concern about town services and how they can best be provided," Vassar said. "This doesn't rise above that."

But Herb Chasan, who opposed the resolution, said the vote has left the impression that Framingham is hostile to immigrants. Some residents have bristled over the changes to the town in the past decade, including the transformation of downtown and the growth in the number of Brazilian immigrants, Chasan said.

He and other opponents of the resolution say that is not the majority feeling in town.

Chasan and some Town Meeting members are working on an alternate resolution that would provide more money for the ESL programs in order to reduce the waiting list.

"We want Framingham to be known as a welcoming town," he said.

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