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Cities should stop doing dirty work for ICE

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A plan to increase the number of immigrant detainees housed at the Santa Ana city jail was rejected by the City Council on Tuesday, after considerable public opposition. The pushback against the detention of individuals whose only wrongdoing was migrating without the proper paperwork is a positive development.

What makes it positive is that the city is moving away from a policy of doing the dirty work for Immigration and Customs Enforcement and caging people who mostly don't need to be – all because the city needs money to pay down the debts it still owes on the jail's construction.

While it was clear Santa Ana has done only the bare minimum in interacting with members of the public over whether or not their city should be engaged in this arrangement, what was on the agenda before the council was a recommendation to the partnership.

Before the council was a proposal to increase space for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender detainees and increase the maximum number of detainees at the jail from 200 to 300. The city still owes about \$27 million in debt payments, and the deal would have brought it a little over \$2 million.

"We would be in a better position, long-term, to repay our debts," City Manager David Cavazos told the council, a fairly straightforward conclusion from a financial perspective.

But as was made clear by the dozens of activists who packed the meeting, human dignity has to be considered as well.

"We urge the council not to increase the fear in this community by increasing immigration detention bed space and deepening this very misguided relationship with ICE," said Christina Fialho, co-executive director of Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement.

Last week, Fialho filed a complaint over the treatment of immigrant women in the city jail on behalf of 31 women alleging invasive, degrading and arbitrary strip searches by jail staff. The complaint is disturbing, but unfortunately is just the most recent with regard to the treatment of women in the jail over the past several years.

Other speakers at the council meeting, like Valley High School teacher Benjamin Vazquez, called on the council to end the relationship with ICE, arguing it goes against the idea of community policing and distorts the dynamics of the city. Others noted the strange optics of a heavily Latino city, and government, working with ICE against the immigrant community.

The council clearly heeded the message and unanimously approved a motion by Councilwoman Michele Martinez to reject the extension and to ask the city manager to look at the phasing out of the ICE contract. "I do not support the expansion of ICE here in Santa Ana," she said. "I will not support a continuance. I would implore my colleagues to have the courage and stand up for what's right."

Her colleagues largely vocalized support for such a move. Councilman David Benavidez tried to introduce some nuance into the discussion, suggesting that since immigrants will be detained somewhere, it might be possible for Santa Ana to detain immigrants in a particularly humane, respectful manner. While that is certainly possible – in theory – it is a difficult idea to endorse, if only because the true discussion that needs to be had, not only in Santa Ana, is the extent to which immigration detention is necessary. The main roadblock to real, substantive discussions on this is that there is certainly a lot of money in caging people. And while it seems to be dying down, the country is just a few months removed from a Trump-induced nativist fervor.

Still, in the interest of and respect for the individual, it is important that communities think carefully about whether they want to be a part of a fundamentally flawed system.

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