

Planning Commission to discuss ICE permit

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION ARGUES THAT PROPOSED FACILITY COULD HARM SANTA MARIA



Protesters fill the main hallway of Santa Maria City Hall on Tuesday night to protest the possible opening of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement office.

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The Planning Commission will hold a preliminary discussion about a proposed permit for the relocation of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, office to Santa Maria during its study session Thursday morning.

The city council's rezoning and general plan amendment for the construction project that includes the facility drew a crowd of protesters to City Hall on Tuesday that packed the building and its surroundings.

While ICE already operates on the Central Coast from its office at the Lompoc Federal Correctional Institution, Los Angeles-based lawyer Christina Fialho said she's concerned about negative impacts that would come to Santa Maria should the office open.

Fialho, a former resident of Santa Maria who co-founded the national group Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement, said she's worried that the center could serve to extend the amount of time the local ICE operation could detain people. Because the Lompoc office operates out of old trailers inside the penitentiary grounds, they can't keep people for very long.

She pointed to the decline of Adelanto after an ICE facility opened there.

"There are no high schools, the elementary schools are failing, there are no after-school programs ... instead it's a hub for mass incarceration," she said.

City Manager Rick Haydon said the facility seeks out and processes the deportation of undocumented immigrants who are already incarcerated in prisons in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties as opposed to illegal immigrants outside the prison system. Steven Finn, a supervisory detention and deportation officer with the Lompoc ICE office, said the Santa Maria office would help to treat people better.

"If we bring someone inside, it'll be more humane than putting them in a van and transporting them south," he said.

Residents opposed to the ICE facility relocation also met with 24th District Congresswoman Lois Capps (D-CA) this week. Capps said during an interview Wednesday that she hopes to serve as a conduit to carry their concerns to the federal government.

"There's somebody in the Washington, D.C. (ICE) office, I don't know who that is yet, who needs to hear that all is not well out here," she said.