

Groups plan to appeal ICE permit approval to City Council

PLANNING COMMISSION PASSED ITEM WEDNESDAY IN FRONT OF THOUSANDS



Thousands of people showed up at the Santa Maria Planning Commission meeting Wednesday night at the Santa Maria Fairpark to express concern over a proposed ICE facility in the city.

February 7, 2014 • [Ben Miller/bmiller@santamariatimes.com](mailto:Ben.Miller@samtimes.com)

Christina Fialho, the executive director of Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement, said she is working with other community members and organizations in Santa Maria to appeal the Planning Commission's 3-1 vote on Wednesday to approve a permit for an Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in the city.

The office, which currently works out of trailers at the federal penitentiary in Lompoc, seeks out undocumented criminals in five jails in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties and processes their deportation.

Lori Haley, a public affairs officer for ICE, said the Lompoc facility processes about 100 people per month, 85 to 90 percent of whom have multiple criminal convictions.

Their crimes range from fraud to manslaughter, and she said the bureau prioritizes the removal of those “who present the greatest risk to our communities.”

Community Development | Director Larry Appel said the commission’s meeting at the Santa Maria Fairpark drew between 2,700 and 4,200 people, many of whom were wearing stickers saying “No ICE.”

Fialho said the location of the facility on West Century Street makes for a larger impact on the community than its current out-of-the-way site in Lompoc.

She said the facility would represent the city government opposing its citizens’ wishes and trust in favor of building a relationship with ICE.

“If the city allows ICE to build a facility in Santa Maria, then its relationship with ICE is clearly growing,” she said.

Stakeholders still are discussing the process of appealing the decision but that they expect to do so before the next City Council meeting, according to Fialho.

The appeal would need to contest one of the findings the commission made in making its decision, City Manager Rick Haydon said. If the council agreed with the appellate, it would overturn the commission’s decision.

However, the vote would likely not end up on the next council agenda on Feb. 18 because of the time taken to process such appeals.

Planning Commissioner Robert Dickerson, the sole board member to vote against the facility’s planned development permit, said he couldn’t make the finding that the project wouldn’t be detrimental to people in the neighborhood.

“The other commissioners didn't take into account, and ultimately the detrimental impact on the psychology, and ... welfare of 50 percent of our population,” he said.

Etta Waterfield, one of three commissioners to vote in favor of the facility, said she believed it would be positive for Santa Maria.

“This allows ICE to vet (detainees) and then send them down to (Los Angeles) and then send them to their country of origin,” she said. “I believe that it’s a security layer that will not let these felons back into our community.”

The City Council's first discussion of the issue drew a large crowd that packed City Hall on Jan. 21, and Dickerson said he expects that kind of participation to continue.

"I think you'll probably see a large turnout for that as well," he said.