Hitting a nerve

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Many in the community probably perked up when 600 people packed into Our Lady of the Peace Catholic Church on Nov. 10 to question the need for an Immigration and Custom Enforcement office in Greeley.

When about 600 Latinos gathered at a city council meeting for the same cause just four days later, the community definitely took notice.

Now the issue sits squarely in the limelight.

Weld District Attorney Ken Buck continues to lobby in favor of an ICE office in Greeley. He says it will get criminals off the streets and make everyone's lives safer.

Sylvia Martinez, the spokeswoman for Latinos Unidos, continues to argue that the number of illegal immigrant criminals doesn't justify the need for an office.

She believes the office would create division in the community.

Doug Woody, a professor of psychological science at the University of Northern Colorado, said the large turnouts demonstrate how sensitive an issue this has become. He said the fact that the Latino community has rallied against the idea proves existing tensions were already beneath the surface.

"The uproar about this issue might reflect larger concerns," said Woody, who teaches a course about the psychology of prejudice. "It's not surprising to see that this may be an extension of the racial tensions we already have in the community."

Linda Morgan Gipson, a Windsor resident and UNC clinical sociology graduate student studying marginalized populations, said this conflict could be an example of the strain theory.

"When there are not enough resources to go around, people begin to feel threatened in their ability to access these resources," Gipson said.

Gipson said an ICE office could lead to racial profiling. This also worries Oralia Lozano, a member for Congregations Building Community, a faith-based social justice group that organized the meeting at Our Lady of the Peace.

Lozano, who served eight years in the U.S. Army Reserve and was in Iraq from 2003-04, said people need to recognize the contribution illegal immigrants make to the labor force that fuels the county's economy.

"I think we all need to come together," said Lozano, 34, of Greeley. "We all live together in this community and we need to learn to come together."

Buck disagrees with concerns about racial profiling. He continues to say his goal is to increase public safety and not tackle the larger issue of illegal immigration. He believes misinformation has created hysteria on both sides of the issue.
"I think that it's important that the silent majority in the middle of this issue is heard," Buck said. "I don't think that the fringes on either side are going to help move this forward."

Buck said information-based discourse, as he and Martinez engaged in Thursday at a human relation commission hearing, can help the community. Gipson agrees that the dialogue can be therapeutic when people stop antagonizing others and address the issues.

Moving the issue forward now rests on the shoulders of city and county officials who hope to capitalize on the passion the issue has elicited.

Greeley Mayor Tom Selders believes the community can take a step toward unity, but only if people on both sides make an effort to understand each other's concerns.

"I hope we can bring people together, and maybe this is a way to do that," Selders said.

For starters, city officials are encouraging members of Latinos Unidos to join city boards and commissions. Currently, minorities represent 10 percent of board and commission members, according to city figures.

Selders said he's proud of the way the city council has handled the sensitive issue. The council asked the human relations commission to analyze the resolution and present a formal recommendation. No date has been set for the presentation, but it should come before the end of the year, Selders said.

"There's not a critical time factor, so let's take our time and do it right," Selders said. "But, at that the same time, I don't want this thing to draw out."

**TIMELINE**

Oct. 10 -- Weld County Commissioners pass a resolution in support of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in Greeley.

Oct. 25 -- Greeley City Council receives the resolution from Weld District Attorney Ken Buck. That night, councilman Ed Phillipsen calls the wording in the document racist.

Oct. 27 -- At a breakfast meeting with Buck and the county commissioners, the city council says it will consider the resolution but with different wording.

Nov. 2 -- A group of community activists addresses the Greeley Police Department with their concerns about the resolution.

Nov. 8 -- At its weekly meeting, the city council decides to have the human relations commission review the resolution and issue of illegal immigration.

Nov. 10 -- About 600 people pack into Our Lady of the Peace Catholic Church for a community meeting organized by Congregations Building Community. Buck, county commissioners and city council members attend and listen to concerns from the primarily Latino audience.

Nov. 14-15 -- The human relations commission begins reviewing the proposals and listening to suggestions from community members.

Nov. 15 -- Latino Unidos, led by Sylvia Martinez, organizes a group of about 600 who arrive at the city council chambers to urge the council to reject and discard the resolution. Members of the group speak during the public input session and then the group has a rally outside.
Nov. 16 -- Greeley residents Joy Breuer and Joan Cox tell Republican lawmakers at the state Capitol on Wednesday that Mexican illegal immigrants are gearing up to seize control of Greeley.

Nov. 17 -- Weld District Attorney Ken Buck tells the human relations commission that an ICE office would improve public safety and not divide the community.