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Steve Bannon in Cincinnati: Border crisis is 'a tragedy of biblical proportions.'

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Even if the federal government doesn't build a wall along the Mexican border, Steve Bannon and a group of conservative activists will build one anyway, as early as next month.

Bannon, who is President Donald Trump's former chief strategist and the controversial right-wing editor of Breitbart, and the leaders of the group called We Build the Wall came into downtown Cincinnati on Tuesday to raise money and promote the effort to build a Mexican border wall on private land with private money.

We Build The Wall organizers chose Cincinnati as the second stop on a nationwide tour despite 1,400 miles separating the Mexican border and Cincinnati. Next stop is Detroit on Thursday.

"I'm in Cincinnati, because the border crisis is in Iowa," Bannon told the crowd of more than 200 people who came to the Hilton Netherland Plaza in Downtown Cincinnati. Some traveled as far away as rural West Virginia. "It's in Ohio. This border crisis is a national crisis."

When it comes to the border wall with Mexico, the country should have the president's back, Bannon said.

"This is a tragedy of biblical proportions," Bannon said. "The answer is not an open border...We can have President Trump's back to do it in the case he can't do it."

Construction on the privately funded wall will start in April, said Brian Kolfage, an Air Force veteran and triple amputee wounded in the Iraq War who founded We Build the Wall.

"When we get the shovels in the dirt, it's going to go like gangbusters," Kolfage told the crowd.

The rally also featured former Milwaukee Sheriff David Clarke and former Colorado Republican Congressman Tom Tancredo.

The speakers blamed the open border with Mexico for the nation's drug problem and related issues with crime and economics. U.S. Customs officials and experts have disagreed with this assessment, with 90 percent of the heroin and 88 percent of the cocaine seized in 2018 fiscal year being smuggled at legal points of entry, not the open border.

Bannon's appearance showed the deep divide on this issue across the country. Outside the hotel, about 60 protestors credited immigrants with building Cincinnati and the nation.

"Cincinnati won't succumb to racism," said Steve Driehaus, a former Democratic member of Congress, speaking to the demonstrators on Fountain Square a block away from the Bannon rally. "We understand the value of the immigrant community."

Inside, many in the audience blamed illegal immigrants for crime and economic hardships. The rally featured three parents who said their children were killed by illegal immigrants.

Steve Ronnebeck on Tuesday related the story he's told Sean Hannity on Fox News as well as Trump, with whom he's met. Ronnebeck said his 21-year-old son, Grant, was shot by an illegal immigrant during a convenience store robbery.

"We'd be safer having Iraq as a border country than Mexico," Ronnebeck said.

There are no national statistics that track crime based on immigration status. But studies from groups, such as the libertarian thinktank Cato Institute, have shown immigrants are not likely to increase crime and actually are less likely to commit crimes than native-born citizens.

Kolfage started We Build The Wall after GoFundMe in December refunded the \$20 million he raised from 337,000 donors. The company refunded the money due to a change in where the money was going, from the federal government to a nonprofit, according to a USA Today story.

Kolfage started the non-profit to raise the \$1 billion to build the wall on private land. The board of directors includes Bannon and former Major League Baseball pitcher Curt Schilling.

Bannon said the wall will not only help United States citizens, it will also Central Americans.

"We have to build this wall to stop this onslaught," Bannon said. "This is to help the people in Central America, so they're not trafficked."

Across the street, Nancy Sullivan along with about 30 other protestors held a sheet painted to look like a brick wall with Spanish graffiti saying "Puentes No Muros," meaning "Bridges not walls," and other slogans. Sullivan, a resident of the Cincinnati neighborhood East Price Hill, said she doesn't understand how Bannon and his supporters can call the border an "emergency."

"I think it is really bizarre effort to keep trying to spin a story that I think most Americans realize is a false story," Sullivan said.