

FREMONT TRIBUNE

Scribner set to decide on immigration ordinance

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A July vote by the Scribner City Council put a city ordinance on immigration—modeled after a similar ordinance in Fremont—on this year’s general election ballot. And this Tuesday, voters will decide its fate.

The ordinance is aimed at preventing illegal immigrants from renting or working in Scribner by mandating all renters to obtain a license, which requires the renter to disclose their citizenship status. It also requires all employers to use federal databases to confirm that all potential employees are in the United States legally.

Opponents of the ordinance, including groups like the ACLU of Nebraska, have said that such laws—both in Fremont and in Scribner — are costly and unenforceable, could lead to discrimination and risk painting the town of 857 mostly white residents as racist or unwelcoming.

Supporters, meanwhile, have argued that the ordinance aims to address concerns brought on by illegal immigration — not immigrants in general. And they feel that allegations of racism are unfair.

The issue appears to have been spurred on by concerns that the Costco and Lincoln Premium Poultry operation could bring an influx of migrant workers into the region, and that some could be undocumented, said Sally Thomas, wife of Scribner Mayor Ken Thomas. Jessica Kolterman, of Lincoln Premium Poultry, said the company believes most of its hires will be local and added that the company complies with the law and verifies all potential employees.

Thomas, argued that Scribner residents have compassion for those who are coming across the border, especially those who are fleeing violence or hardship and who are just looking for better opportunities. She also argued that the community is always welcoming to immigrants. But, she said that she’s concerned about the prevalence of illegal drugs coming across the border, and the possibility that at least some of those who come here illegal could bring violence or other crime.

“I think that, as a community, we have a moral obligation to welcome any law abiding citizen or legal immigrant who chooses to live here regardless of their skin color, and I think that’s how most people see it,” said Sally Thomas, wife of Scribner Mayor Ken Thomas. “To me, you’re breaking the law if you come in the wrong way. I understand why they’re doing it—they’re fleeing persecution—but there’s so many that we can’t just let everybody in.”

But the ACLU argues that concerns about crime are misplaced. Danielle Conrad, executive director of the ACLU of Nebraska, pointed to several studies that show that illegal immigration does not increase the prevalence of violent crime or drug and alcohol problems. One from the

libertarian Cato Institute found that in Texas in 2015, undocumented immigrants were less likely to be convicted of homicide than native-born Americans.

The U.S. immigration system is broken, Conrad argues, but it should, legally, be fixed on the federal level, not at the local level. and that laws like this risk creating an unwelcome environment for immigrants, who, undocumented or not, may feel targeted by the ordinance.

“We appreciate that Nebraskans of good will across the political spectrum have frustrations with the brokenness of our federal immigration system,” Conrad said. “But the way to address those frustrations appropriately is to work toward comprehensive immigration reform on the federal level and not to pass suspect local laws, which risk increased property tax, which risk racial profiling and discrimination.”

The ACLU has previously argued that government databases that would be used to check citizenship are often inaccurate, and that localities can face expensive legal battles to defend the laws which are ultimately difficult to enforce. The ACLU itself filed a lawsuit against Fremont’s ordinance, which was ultimately unsuccessful.

“Every year, the ACLU contacts us,” said Fremont City Administrator Brian Newton. “And they want to see the data. They want to make sure that we are following the ordinance and that we’re not discriminating.”

Thomas argues that the issues of expensive legal battles originate from outside the community, noting that the city had received “threatening” letters from the ACLU, warning that there could be financial consequences for passing the ordinance.

“It’s not going to be any skin off their teeth to spend a bunch of money to try and tell our little town how we need to live,” Thomas said.

Conrad said it was too early to tell if action would be taken in Scribner, but that the ACLU will continue to monitor the situation.

“This was definitely not a fight that we were looking to pick at any point along the way,” Conrad said. “But we are a statewide civil rights and civil liberties organization, and protecting immigrants rights and refugees’ rights are a big part of our work.”