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Immigration, checkpoint concerns linger, particularly among members of Hispanic community here

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Although the Durham Police Department has announced it is suspending vehicle checkpoints, representatives of the immigrant community remain concerned.

Brian Callaway sent a letter to public officials following a suspected checkpoint Feb. 20 near Durham's School for Creative Studies and told members of Durham's Human Relations Commission last week he is working with Alerta Migratoria.

Sandro Mendoza, a representative of Alerta Migratoria, said checkpoints are nothing new for the Hispanic community.

Mendoza said he sees law enforcement constantly near churches, soccer games and places where the Hispanic community hangs out.

"It's something that affects me, my family and my community ...," Mendoza said. "The police department said it's going to stop all checkpoints. I really hope that's going to happen -- same for the sheriff."

Human Relations Commissioner Dick Ford asked if the group is seeking all to eliminate all checkpoints in Durham County "because they may in fact stop someone who has an illegal immigration status."

Callaway said he is asking for an end to checkpoints because of "the fear it propagates."

Human Relations Commissioner Ricky Hart asked if the group has researched the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which allows the federal government to deputize local officers to enforce immigration laws through Section 287(g) of the INA.

"It could be a ramification of losing some funding," Hart said referencing federal grants for equipment and what he thinks would happen if local authorities don't participate.

He said he checkpoints are up to local authorities.

During a March 5 forum hosted by the N.C. Congress of Latino Organizations (NCCLLO) and Durham Congregations Associations and Neighborhoods (Durham CAN), both Durham Police Chief C.J. Davis and Sheriff's Office Major Paul Martin said their agencies are not currently involved in 287(g) or the Secure Community federal program.

Both also said their respective departments do not collaborate or plan to collaborate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement in rounding up and deporting immigrants, and do not set up routine checkpoints near schools or places of worship.

"Law enforcement leaders plan to vehemently deny any participation in immigrant deportation," Davis said March 5. "Checkpoints in the city of Durham have been directed to cease and desist."

The following day, she announced the suspension of motor vehicle checkpoints in the city. The department will continue to participate in multi-agency highway safety campaigns, such as Booze It & Lose It and Click It or Ticket, Davis said.

Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Tamara Gibbs told The News and Observer that agency is not suspending "operational" checkpoints.

"We want to reiterate that we do not conduct checkpoints in search of undocumented residents," Gibbs said.

Callaway said if the Sheriff's Office takes a position on 287(g) and checkpoints are set up through town, he thinks ramifications could result in school enrollment numbers decreasing and teachers losing jobs.

"Everybody -- the Cato Institute included -- mentioned the economic contribution of immigrants and undocumented immigrants is substantial to our base economy," Callaway said, referring to a well-known libertarian think tank.

Human Relations Commissioner Ricardo Correa said he's worked with the Latino community for years and sees a difference of 287(g) in Durham County, compared to other North Carolina counties.

He said there was an incident in Wake County where a deputy waited outside a church each Sunday until a complaint was made.

Correa described it as a Catch-22 because he said as a father, a police presence in his neighborhood makes it safe.

As a pastor in Durham for the past seven years, Correa said he has worked with city officials for local law enforcement agencies to recognize the alternative Faith ID promoted by Durham-based El Centro Hispano..

"DPD and the Sheriff's Department, so far in all the years that I've worked, has not harassed any Latino that got pulled over because they're driving without their license for whatever reason," Correa said.

Although Correa understands the fear, he said he receives calls of concern about checkpoints and officials. He said someone last week thought an ICE officer was at Wal-Mart. A photo showed a parks and wildlife employee.

“There’s a lot of fear, because there’s a lot of speculation about what to do and what what not to do,” Corraera said.

Human Relations Commissioner Diane Standaert stories at a meeting in the faith community she attended a few weeks ago are similar to ones of Alerta Migratoria.

“I think having people retreat in fear is not what healthy or what is good for us,” Standaert said.

“All of a sudden people are fearful,” Hart said. “Is it because they are here illegally and they fear that ‘If I get caught that I get deported?’”

Human Relations Commissioner Susan Austin said she thinks it has to do with the new presidential administration.

“We’re moving from administrations’ policy to something that we have no idea,” Austin said.

Correa said there’s a fear of going back to a country someone knows, but where violence has increased, the person comes back from the U.S. is singled out, it’s a country their children don’t know or there’s higher unemployment rates.

In response to Alerta Migratoria concerns, Human Relations Commissioner Girija Mahajan made a motion to set up a subcommittee to gather information about the best course of action related to issues of immigration and law enforcement here within Durham County.

She suggested the possibility of hosting a forum that would allow more community conversation and chances for questions.

Fourteen members of the Human Relations Commission approved the motion, with Hart voting against and Ford abstaining.

“I don’t think that the commission has any jurisdiction over immigration,” Ford said, clarifying he supports the commission looking into concerns about police enforcement, “but not on this wide political and national issue.”