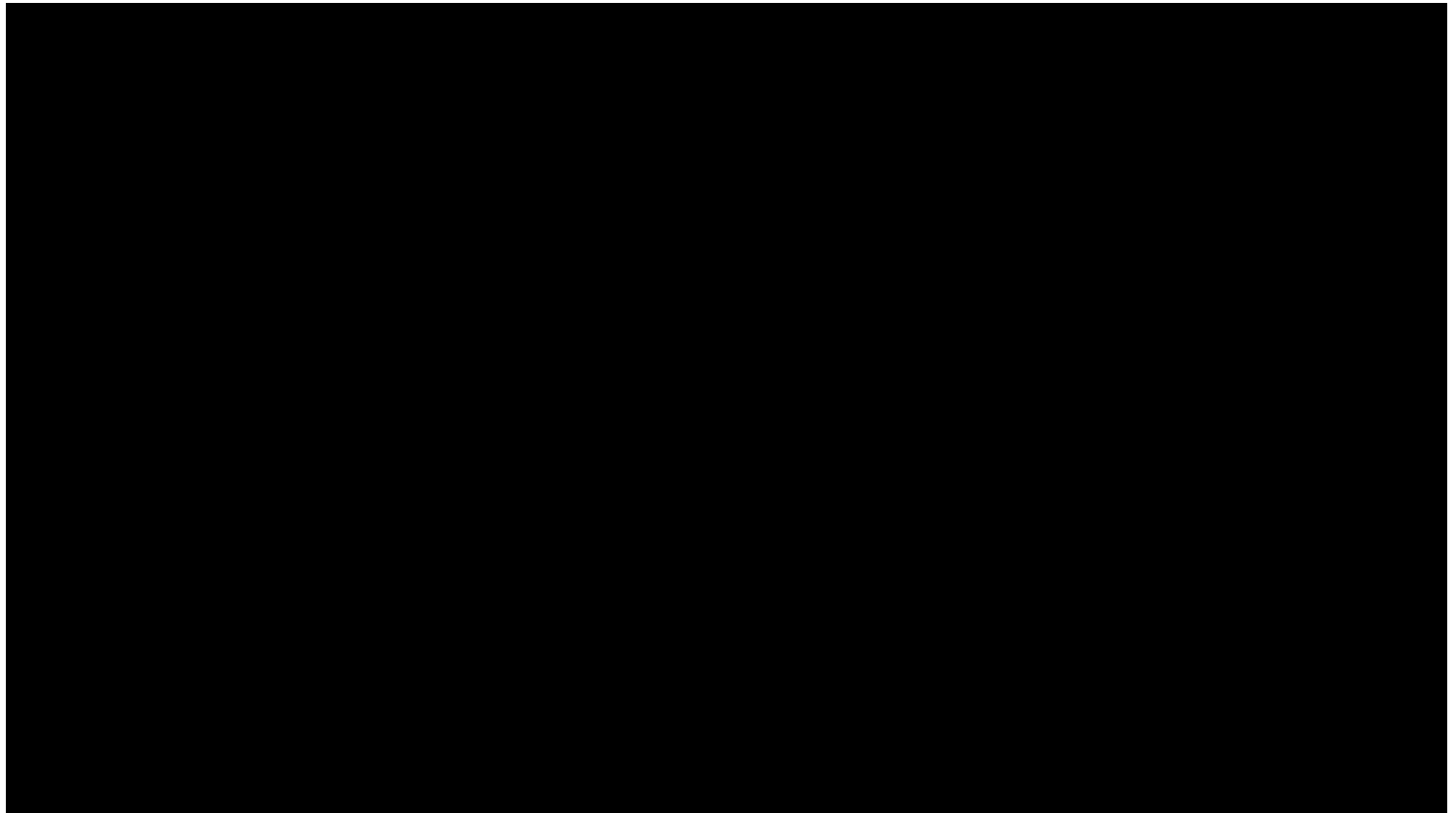


Advocates: Orange County must protect immigrants



At Tuesday's Orange County commission meeting, activists and advocates said that a crackdown on undocumented immigrants could have huge effects for businesses in the tourism industry.



By **Steven Lemongello**
Orlando Sentinel

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The national debate over immigration arrived in the **Orange County** Commission chambers Tuesday, with activists asking for community meetings on how the county can better protect immigrants, including the idea of becoming a sanctuary county.

Orange County Mayor **Teresa Jacobs**, however, said immigration policy was above the county's authority and that it was not the county's role to intervene.

"If there's going to be a forum and a discussion, it needs to be with our congressional leaders who are in

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Orange County is one of the largest counties in Florida that isn't a sanctuary county, where undocumented immigrants are not reported by county authorities to the federal government. There are no sanctuary cities at the municipal level in Florida.

Cities and counties that claim sanctuary status usually argue that law enforcement is improved when residents cooperate without fear of being deported.

"If there is any county in the state of Florida, Orange County is the county for this to happen," said Maria Bolton-Joubert, an environmentalist and former county Soil and Water District candidate who attended the meeting. "We are the tourist destination of the world."

In Florida, Broward, Hernando, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach, Pasco and Pinellas counties were all considered sanctuary counties by the Center for Immigration Studies at the end of 2016. But Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez reversed his county's sanctuary policy last month after President Donald Trump threatened to pull federal funding of any county or city that didn't comply with immigration enforcement.

A Florida Atlantic University poll released Tuesday showed that a majority of Floridians favor sanctuary policies, with 52 percent saying they don't want the federal government to cut off funding to sanctuary cities and counties and 46 percent saying they don't want federal legal action against them.

In all, nine people spoke about immigration during the public portion of the commission meeting. Several emotionally described their own immigrant backgrounds and stories of immigrants they know.

May Santiago of Winter Park talked about her best friend, an Iranian-American, who she said had trash dumped on her lawn just last week. Debbie Soto of Deltona tearfully spoke of her father's side of the family escaping the Holocaust and later the dictatorship in Argentina.

"We can't allow residents to live in fear and live in panic," Soto said.

Phillip Arroyo, a law student at Florida A&M University, said the object of addressing the Orange commission "was to let elected officials know that the community is concerned."

Henry Lim, an Orlando immigration attorney, said mass deportations would have a huge impact on the tourism economy of Orange County. Companies with large numbers of undocumented immigrant workers could be at risk of losing as much as half of their workforce, which in turn would affect the jobs of the other half.

"In an area where the tourism industry is the number one economic engine, telling people [the county] won't protect them is very damaging," Lim said.

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“Sometimes, when we go outside the realm of what we have jurisdiction over, we create expectations that we can’t satisfy,” said Jacobs, a Republican. “I really, strongly believe that while individual cities may find a way to try to intervene in the immigration debate, it’s Congress [and] our federal government that needs to address how we’re going to move forward.”

Commissioner Emily Bonilla, a Democrat, agreed that immigration is a federal — not county — issue, but she was open to a community meeting to discuss it.

“I look forward to working with the county commission to bringing stakeholders together to provide quality of life to all residents of Orange County,” Bonilla said.

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