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IDEAS SOUGHT FROM OTHER CITIES

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BODY:

SANTA CLARITA - Santa Clarita city officials, reacting to complaints from some residents and business people about dozens of immigrants who gather on street corners to look for day labor, are talking with their counterparts in other cities about how they handle the problem.

In a Santa Clarita City Council meeting this week, Mayor Bob Kellar pressed the city staff to get information from other cities, including Glendale and Thousand Oaks. Each of those cities operates a hiring center - a site with toilets and other amenities where laborers can connect with employers.

"It's an opportunity for the city to address the issue and resolve the problem," Kellar said.

The renewed interest in the day laborers - who mostly congregate near building-supply and equipment-rental stores along San Fernando Road - came after dozens of complaints trickled into City Hall over the past six months, city spokeswoman Gail Ortiz said Wednesday.

"The city has received several complaints from area businesses that are having problems with public urination, congregation of workers in front of their businesses, or they have served as an intimidation factor," she said.

"We'll take a look at what they have in Glendale and how it works. We feel strongly that we have to involve the community in any kind of solution."

Santa Clarita previously has resisted building a hiring center. In the early 1990s, the City Council rejected a staff recommendation to spend \$20,000 on a facility, opting instead to ask immigration officials to sweep the area and deport any illegal immigrants.

Citing traffic hazards, city government also adopted an ordinance in 1997 prohibiting day laborers from soliciting passing motorists for work. But attempts to enforce that ordinance were abandoned after a U.S. District Court ruled in 2000 that a similar law in Los Angeles

County was unconstitutional.

On any given day, from a dozen to more than 25 laborers line San Fernando Road in search of work, said Joe Trejo, a county sheriff's deputy who has worked in Newhall for nearly a decade. He has heard complaints about littering and traffic obstruction over the years.

"It's competitive," he said. "If you don't get picked up, you're out. You don't work; you don't eat. ... Anything that would improve the situation out there is always good."

Berta Gonzalez-Harper, a community activist and advocate for Latinos, believes that city officials must win over the laborers for any plan to work.

"There is a lot of suspicion, and you can't blame them," she said. "It's the credibility of officials, the credibility of whoever it is that will do this. ... Day laborers are not going to volunteer themselves to be corralled in one spot."

In Thousand Oaks, where officials invested \$30,000 in a site in 2002, job seekers find work through a part-time coordinator in an outdoor yard, outfitted with portable toilets and picnic tables, near a greenbelt. It took successive outreach efforts to persuade laborers to move from a residential neighborhood to the designated site, said Caroline Milton, a senior community-development analyst. There are still some complaints from residents, but it's an improvement.

"The approach that we wanted to take was to assist the men to find work," she said. "It's more organized, but it's not the final solution. There are residents across the greenbelt who felt this should be in the parking lot of a home-improvement store."

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