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## Billboard towering over South Side intensifies debate over immigration

**By Lourdes Medrano**

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In the heart of Tucson's South Side, a new billboard overlooks the mostly Hispanic area as it fans the flames of the illegal-immigration debate.

"STOP the INVASION," the bold letters in red, white and blue scream to drivers headed west on Interstate 10. "Secure our borders," it demands in smaller letters. A few dark splotches of paint — likely applied by opponents of the message — already mar the sign.

The billboard is one of 12 that have gone up in several states, including California, Texas and Florida. The Grassfire.org signs are part of a national campaign that seeks to pressure lawmakers to clamp down on illegal immigration.

"It's like right out there, in your face," Alex Arenas, 25, said of the billboard tucked in the rear of Southgate Shopping Center at South Sixth Avenue and Interstate 10. "It's kind of rude, especially over here."

As Arenas and his friend, Jesus Figueroa, 26, worked out at a gym near the billboard, Grassfire.org President Steve Elliott and 14 Tucsonans who like the billboard's message huddled by a U.S. flag for a news conference. Elliott, the only speaker, said the campaign was launched in May and "represents literally millions of citizens across this country."

The United States is being overrun with people who come here illegally, Elliott said, which "truly amounts to an invasion of our community."

Elliott said a Senate proposal to legalize millions of people living in the country illegally and massive pro-immigrant marches in April and May were the catalysts that spawned the billboard campaign.

Many people were offended to see immigrants — including those living here illegally — waving Mexican flags and comparing their quest for legalization to the Civil Rights Movement, Elliott said.

"This very much upset grassroots Americans."

Now, Elliott added, "American citizens are being exposed to the facts of this debate, the reality of the economic impact, of the social impact, of the law and order threat, of the national security threat."

He hopes the billboard will advance the debate on illegal immigration, Elliott said, shrugging off the sign's paint damage.

Timothy Wells, a U.S. history teacher at Aztlán Academy, a charter school at the shopping center, said he thinks defacing the billboard was wrong — even if he disagrees with the message. It probably will spark controversy rather than help the immigration debate, he said, because the term "invasion" intends "to inflame people."

Sergio Ramirez, a student at the academy, said he finds the billboard offensive. It is an insult to people such as he and his parents, who are legal immigrants from Mexico, he said. Ramirez, 15, was born in Tucson.

"When I saw it, my initial reaction was, 'Why is there so much hatred?' " the teen said. "I believe people come here for a better life for their children."

To retiree Jim Nixon and his wife, Nita, who stood behind Elliott on Tuesday, the billboard the couple said they helped pay for conveys their frustration over the steady stream of people who sneak into the country illegally.

"If people want to come in, there are legal ways to come in," Nixon said.

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