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More take path to citizenship

By Susan Palmer

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Nine days. That's how long immigrants who want to become citizens have before the naturalization application fee jumps 80 percent.

It's just one of many fee increases that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services will implement beginning July 30.

Right now it costs \$400 - \$330 for the application and \$70 for fingerprinting - for foreigners who have been given permanent resident status in the United States to apply for citizenship. At the end of the month it will cost \$595 for the application and \$80 for fingerprints.

That change may be one of the reasons more immigrants have applied in the past year, said Citizenship and Immigration Services spokeswoman Sharon Rummery.

Almost 60 percent more people submitted their paperwork in the first five months of 2007 compared with the same period in 2006, agency records show. Oregon saw a 55 percent increase in applications during that time. But the cost is just one factor, Rummery said.

"There are a whole lot of sociological influences going on," she said.

Next year immigrants will face a new civics and history test, she said, and some people worry that it will be more difficult than the current test.

The 2008 presidential election may also prompt people who want the opportunity to vote, she said.

Outreach by activists is also likely to be playing a part. A national campaign began in January to encourage those who are eligible to apply for citizenship and then to register to vote, sponsored by immigrant rights groups such as CAUSA. In Oregon, Catholic Charities Immigration Legal Services will have staff on hand at a Portland church today to help eligible people fill out the paperwork.

But Rummery, who occasionally conducts swearing-in ceremonies, says the reasons people give for making the decision to become citizens are often more personal. They may want to petition for a family member to immigrate. Maybe their children who are already citizens have been encouraging them. "You could not put your finger on any one thing," she said.

While the citizenship application fee increases are hefty, they're nothing compared with some fee increases for other foreign nationals. For example, those who are eligible to swap a temporary visa for a permanent one - say, someone in the country on a student visa who has married an American - will have to pay 186 percent more when the fee goes from \$325 to \$930.

And permanent visas for some entrepreneur immigrants have gone up by as much as 500 percent.

The sweeping changes represent the agency's most comprehensive increases since 1998, Rummery said. Congress voted in 1988 to make immigration services a fee-based agency. No taxpayer money supports it.

"We're required by law to recoup the cost of doing business with the fees that we charge," she said.

There are some fee reductions tucked in among the increases. Children adjusting their status to permanent residence with their parents will have a 25 percent reduction. And those seeking asylum may receive fee waivers.

The additional money will help push through a backlog of applications, improve security measures and shift the agency from a paper-based system to an electronic one that will be faster and more effective, Rummery said.

The agency expects that by September 2008, it will be able to reduce processing times for its four most common applications from six months to four months. And it expects that those applying for naturalization will have to wait an average of five months instead of seven, according to information on its Web site.

In Eugene, immigration lawyer Rachel Hecht said the fee changes haven't increased the number of clients she sees, but she's had a lot of people call who are confused. Some people have misinterpreted the news as a change in the rules, that all they have to do is pay the money and they qualify for citizenship.

What she hasn't seen is people balking at moving forward because of the fees. The attitude is: It's worth whatever money it takes to become a citizen, she said.

Some people have wondered whether the money will be used to pay for the 700-mile fence Congress voted last year to construct along the Mexican border, but Rummery said the fees won't be shared with Customs and Border Protection or with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

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### **CITIZENSHIP QUIZ**

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administers a test to all immigrants applying for citizenship. Starting in 2008, the agency will switch to a new set of test questions. Below is a sampling of potential questions:

- What is the supreme law of the land?
- What do we call the first 10 amendments to the Constitution?
- What are the three branches of the government?
- How many justices are on the Supreme Court?
- What is the name of the vice president?
- How many U.S. senators does each state have?
- Name one of the two longest rivers in the United States.
- Name one of the major U.S. Indian tribes.

(Find the answers at [www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis](http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis))

- *Citizenship and Immigration Services Web site*

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