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## Price of citizenship going up

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**By Ben Lefebvre STAFF WRITER**

CARPENTERSVILLE -- The seats are set, the red, white and blue balloons hanging in midair and the American flags look impeccable as frosting on the two cakes placed on cafeteria tables in Otto Engineering. Maria Arreola Alonso, a company assembler and newly minted U.S. citizen from Guanajuato, Mexico, walks to the front of the room and addresses the 50 or so co-workers attending her company-sponsored citizenship party.

The shy 22-year-old Elgin resident, in a quiet voice tinged with a Spanish accent, thanked her co-workers for showing up, posed for a few photos and sat down with friends to enjoy a piece of chocolate cake.

Her party came just in time. Alonso, who followed her father to Illinois in 2002, is one of the last immigrants to receive citizenship before the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service nearly doubles citizenship application fees starting Aug. 1. She paid about \$400 for her application and fingerprinting fees. In less than two weeks, the same will cost \$695 -- with no guarantee of the application winning approval. The cost to start the green card process, the first step in attaining citizenship, will increase from \$325 to \$1,100.

Asked why she decided to get her citizenship now, Alonso replied, "For the right to vote. And also because it's getting more expensive."

Fee hike controversy

That "getting expensive" sparked its own controversy in Washington, D.C., when the new fee schedule was proposed in January. Public opposition poured from across the political spectrum, from the likes of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to the conservative think-tank the Heritage Foundation. Chicago Democrats Sen. Barack Obama and Rep. Luis Gutierrez co-sponsored The Citizen Promotion Act with, in March, a now-dormant bill intended to create oversight of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service fee structure and delegate some of its responsibilities to other government agencies.

Agency spokeswoman Marylou Carvelle said the agency needed the increase to survive. The agency is almost completely fee-driven, depending on applicants for 90 percent of its \$1.7 billion budget.

"The issue is that without this increase, we cannot operate," she said. "Since 9/11 we have been tasked with doing background checks for every single applicant. All of this costs money."

Carvelle said the increased revenue will help the still paper-based agency go digital, rebuild some of its dilapidated offices, hire additional employees and work to shrink its case backlog. Ultimately, she said, it will help the agency's 15,500 workers to stay atop a case load that's grown from 602,972 in fiscal 2005 to 711,538 so far this fiscal year.

But critics have charged that the increase only papers over deeper inefficiencies in the agency and will unfairly affect a class of people among the least able to pay. Some say the agency's reliance on fees is itself the problem -- a 31-year veteran of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service quoted in the Washington Post compared the fee-plan to "a Ponzi scheme," with current applicants jumping through more and more financial hoops to pay for the processing of older cases.

"Quite a number of things (the agency) proposed to do are things that we should be paid for out of general revenue," said Fred Tsao, director of the Chicago-based Illinois Coalition for Immigration and Refugee Rights. "They're benefits not just for immigrants, but the whole country."

Tsao's group also oversees the New Americans Initiative, a nonprofit that offers free assistance in navigating the citizenship process to applicants throughout metro Chicago. Luvia Quinones, a citizenship specialist there, has two words for how she thinks the increased fees will affect immigrants seeking citizenship: "A lot."

"We did research before this program started," she said. "The three barriers for people to apply for citizenship is lack of information, the fee and lack of English."

How exactly the new fees will affect those seeking citizenship in the future isn't known yet, she said, but for now the increase has helped fuel a rush of applications. Her group, working with the likes of Centro de Informacion in Elgin and Carpentersville, has processed 5,260 applications between April and June, she said, triple the number from the same period two years ago.

Who pays?

While the politically connected argue about how to pay for the system and people like Alonso continue to foot the bill, some local businessmen are stepping in to assist employees. Companies like First Hospitality Group Inc., a Rosemont-based company that runs 12 hotels in the Chicago area, offers ESL courses and has reimbursed \$400 to 11 of its employees who passed the U.S. citizenship test this year.

"We just noticed that they were motivated to learn English, and we do a lot of programs to help employees improve their quality of life," said company spokesman Jose Cabrera. "These are people who work really hard in hotels. Some of them come from limited backgrounds, and this is a way for them to better themselves."

Back amid the cake and balloons in the Otto Engineering cafeteria, owner Tom Roeser said his company also offers ESL courses and reimburses half the application fee for employees passing the citizenship test. He said the company will continue to do so after the increase. Roeser said he's seen about 50 of these citizenship parties for employees over the years, calling the whole endeavor "an investment."

"Citizenship is symbolic," he said. "It means you're making an investment in America. For people wanting to make an investment in America, we'll help them."

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