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U.S. residents seek citizenship to play active role

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LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - In a popular morning talk show based in Los Angeles, Mexican disc jockey Eduardo "Piolin" Sotelo asks his listeners to take part in a quiz on civics.

In the slot dubbed "Who Wants to be a Citizen?" the popular host encourages Hispanic listeners to call in and answer questions on U.S. history, government and the English language.

"If you want to prove that you love this great nation, then you have to become a citizen," Sotelo, whose nickname translates as "Tweety Pie," told Reuters in a telephone interview.

"The residency card is not enough. We want to be part of the American family," he added.

The Mexican jock is at the spearhead of a drive among Hispanic activists across the United States who are calling on legal residents to step up and become citizens.

The move began with mass pro-immigration rallies in 2006 and gathered pace with the failure of a Senate immigration bill in June that sought tougher enforcement together with a path out of the shadows for millions of undocumented immigrants.

According to U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, the number of new Americans reached 702,589 in 2006, up more than a fifth on the number registered five years earlier.

A sharp rise in applications came this year as legislators wrangled over the immigration bill backed by President George W. Bush, with applications jumping by more than half to 115,175 in May, up from the 74,553 a year earlier.

Activists said the tough debate over immigration has finally galvanized many eligible long-term residents into seeking citizenship.

"The debate focused on illegal immigrants, but it has made many people who have made their lives here think about the security of citizenship," said Elias Bermudez, the founder of Immigrants Without Borders activist group in Phoenix, Arizona.

In part, the rise in the number of residents seeking naturalization may also be driven by a move to increase the cost of a citizenship application. Set to take effect July 30, the price hike will raise the cost to \$675 from \$400.

VOTER REGISTRATION

One of the reasons that Piolin and others encourage legal residents to become citizens is so that they can participate fully in civic life and vote -- although he says he favors no party and "is not a politician."

The citizenship campaign is accompanied by a call to register voters, which has been taken up by the media that serve immigrant communities.

The Spanish-language Univision network -- which carries Sotelo's show -- backs the drive, which is supported by advocacy groups, as well as the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials and a service workers' trade union.

The spirited campaign has been praised by editorial writers in The Los Angeles Times, which highlighted the role of "pop culture civics teachers" like Piolin in getting people interested in voting.

"If it persuades even a few more new Americans to get involved in civic life, all the wrangling over immigration reform won't have been for nothing," it said.

The message appears to be hitting home.

After living in the United States for 17 years, Salvadoran Jeronimo Salguero is applying to become a citizen. Speaking to Reuters by telephone, he said he has prepared all the paperwork and plans to mail it before July 30.

"As a citizen, you can vote," said Salguero, who moved to the United States from El Salvador when he was 24. He works as the program director of a day labor center in Los Angeles and believes that citizenship can be a powerful tool for change.

"To decide the future of this country, we need to be U.S. citizens," he said.

(With additional reporting by Tim Gaynor in Phoenix)

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