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Immigrant crackdown criticized

BY MICHAEL RUBINKAM; ASSOCIATED PRESS

HAZLETON - The city's highly publicized campaign of targeting illegal immigrants threatens to drive away business and industry and damage prospects for economic revitalization, a new report asserts.

The report, by polling firm Zogby International, challenges the mayor's claim that illegal immigrants are responsible for overburdened police, schools and hospitals. It concludes that Hazleton should embrace immigration as a "solution to an aging and declining population."

Zogby was hired by a civic group, the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, to identify economic and demographic trends and how they will affect future development in the city about 85 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

The partnership, which is affiliated with the local chamber of commerce, has not taken a position on the illegal immigrant crackdown and immediately distanced itself from Zogby's comments. Zogby was paid \$50,000 for the report.

"We didn't ask for political advice," said former Penn State-Hazleton chancellor John Madden, a partnership official who appeared with Zogby's founder, pollster John Zogby, at a news conference Wednesday.

Republican Mayor Lou Barletta has repeatedly declared that illegal immigrants are wrecking the city of more than 30,000. Last year, he pushed through a law that targeted landlords who rented to illegal immigrants and businesses that employed them.

The law, emulated by dozens of towns around the nation, was recently struck down by a federal judge as unconstitutional following a legal challenge by the American Civil Liberties Union and Hispanic groups. The city has appealed the ruling.

In a commentary accompanying the report, Mr. Zogby urged the partnership to "challenge the mayor on every front" and warned that Hazleton's crackdown on illegal immigrants could damage the city's economic prospects.

"The current atmosphere threatens to set Hazleton back," he wrote. "The companies who want to locate here will rethink their position if the labor force is driven out."

While Hazleton has a rich ethnic tradition, "now fear reigns supreme, and the biggest fear is that this great tradition can be hijacked, especially by national demagogues trying to accent the worst," Mr. Zogby wrote.

He also contended that racism is a "critical local issue in Hazleton" and that a "massive community effort needs to be made to root out the disease of racism."

Witold J. Walczak, legal director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania, said the report "documents how these misguided laws and the mayor's demagoguery retard economic growth, produce an environment that is toxic for foreigners and ultimately cloud Hazleton's otherwise promising future."

But Mr. Barletta, who attended the news conference, said the report is filled with inaccuracies regarding crime, schools and the city's health system and that he was disappointed that Mr. Zogby inserted "his own personal political opinion on immigration" into it.

The city contributed \$1,000 toward the cost of the report.

"It's not what we were looking for," Mr. Barletta said.