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Hispanic Roundtable, OCHLA meet with politicians

By Arooj Ashraf, La Prensa Correspondent

Cleveland: The *Hispanic Roundtable* and the *Ohio Commission on Hispanic/Latino Affairs (OCHLA)* met with local delegates from Congress, Ohio House, and Senate, as well as Cleveland City Council on Monday, Jan. 30, 2012 to discuss policy matters affecting the Latino community.



Senator Shirley Smith, State Rep. Mike Foley, State Rep. Nickie Antonio, State Rep. Bill Patmon, State Rep. Armond Budish, State Rep. Nan Baker, Councilman Brian Cummins, and Councilman Joe Cimperman Staffer, Jake Winfield with the Roundtable's José Feliciano Sr. and Andrés González.

Information focused on three major goals of the Hispanic Roundtable, education, empowerment (representation and voting rights), and economic development.

"It is critical that our local lawmakers know who we are, what we need, and how we intend to achieve our mission to provide opportunities of growth and development among Hispanics in Ohio," says, *José Feliciano*, Chair of the Hispanic Roundtable.

Delegates received brief overviews of the action the Roundtable has taken on each initiatives and improvements that can be made with their help. *Andrés González* said the Hispanic Roundtable is the largest mobilizing vehicle in the form of *Convención*, which takes place every two years and through the six core areas is emphasizing synergy and reform within the community. "If we do not vote, we have no voice," he said.

State Representative *Mike Foley* said the meeting helped him understand the needs and demographics of the community better.

Feliciano said the issues bilingual ballots and immigration reform are two contentious issues that ignite emotionally charged rhetoric and hinder progress and the organization wants to remain focused and work on issues that move the community forward. He added any legislation that mirrors Arizona's *Senate Bill 1070* is unnecessary in Ohio. "We are here trying to engage in self-help, those issues draw a lot of emotion and we get defensive," said Feliciano.

Providing citizens bilingual ballots ensures an informed electorate that is engaged and feels empowered to cast their vote and perform their civic duty. *Magda Gomez* said the Roundtable wants the electorate to be informed and increase voter registration, request absentee ballots. *Pastor Max Rodas* added churches are increasing their collaborations and promoting civic involvement among their congregations, and actually making plans to take vans and buses from the churches to cast votes during primary and Presidential elections.

"We are very excited by what is happening in Cleveland, we have much to learn and are waking up," he said. The congregation like those run by *Reverend José Reyes* are also providing English as second language lessons, citizenship classes and assistance with citizenship applications.

A partnership with predominantly African-American churches is also increasing and Rodas said together a stronger voice is emerging in favor of comprehensive immigration reform.

With nearly 70 percent high school drop-out rate in the *Cleveland Metropolitan School Districts* focus and strategizes for education assistance and programs raised much concern among legislators.



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Victor Ruiz, Executive Director of *Esperanza Inc.*, said Latinos and Asians are the fastest growing communities in Cleveland and they tend to remain close to the city. The education crisis will have detrimental effect on the economy, jobs and crime rate. "We have home grown talent that is not being nurtured," said Ruiz.

He said *Esperanza* is addressing core needs for language needs, mentoring, college scholarships but there needs to be more money redirected towards such programs and a cohesive partnerships between business, colleges and employment trainings programs needs to be strengthened.

State Representative *Nickie J. Antonio* said college is not the right fit for all and questioned the opportunities available.

Ingrid Angel, Director of *El Barrio/ WSEM*, said the agency provides several services for job readiness, and opportunities to earn a General Education Diploma; "There are just not enough places offering bilingual GEDs." Angel said this is critical for a demographic that is denied basic access to entry level jobs. She also said more funds need to be directed towards community agencies that are often first access points for assistance. *WESM*'s programs are being replicated in three cities and Angel said more similar programs are needed in the city.

Gus Hoyas said while apprenticeships are providing work experience, many companies are not hiring from the pool and many Latinos are not getting through the front door. Adding to this concern is the *E-Verify* legislation that Angel believes will discourage employers from even considering candidates and said it is an unnecessary measure in Ohio where less than 2 percent of the population would be disqualified.

State Representative *Nan A. Bakers* said she understood the concern but the legislation will assist and protect employers.

The Roundtable expects to create a scorecard and follow-up with the legislators semi-annually to discuss the progress and address issues hindering the advancement of the Latino agenda. It will seek to keep the legislators engaged for the needs of communities they serve and strengthen their relationship.

Hispanic Roundtable and OCHLA will also continue to improve their partnerships and work on aligned agendas.

The Hispanic Roundtable is a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to act as a catalyst to empower the Latino Community to become full partners in economic, education, political, civic and social life of Greater Cleveland. The Hispanic Roundtable's philosophy is to encourage self-help and self determination. Two civic programs will be held before elections to inform voters of important issues and give candidates the opportunity meet and inform the community of their platforms.

The mission of OCHLA is to advise the Governor, the Ohio General Assembly, and state government agencies on all matters affecting Hispanic Ohioans, to connect the diverse Latino communities across the State of Ohio by serving as a hub of information, and to build the capacity of Latino community organizations, especially those of, for, and by Hispanic Ohioans. To learn more about OCHLA, visit www.ochla.ohio.gov

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