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# Delegation hopes to study, change Mont. Co. immigration

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Friday - 7/15/2011, 6:57am ET

Paul D. Shinkman, wtop.com

WASHINGTON -- Montgomery County leaders will take a trip to El Salvador later this month in an effort to better understand a demographic gaining influence in the county and bolster the country's infrastructure so fewer would-be immigrants feel the need to leave.

County Executive Ike Leggett will lead the July 23-30 trip to Morazan in the Central American country. He will be joined by local politicians, development organizations and businesses and cultural leaders, along with their family members. The group will set up the county's first sister city program and solidify the relationship with the Salvadoran government.

The group's goal is to stem the level of emigration from El Salvador through economic and social development work, Leggett said, and to learn more about a people who comprise most of the local Hispanic community.

"We want to better understand the challenges they face," Leggett told WTOP. He referenced the "very difficult task of leaving their country" that many immigrants underwent when coming to Montgomery County, which he said is "probably the largest (Salvadoran) community outside of El Salvador."

Hispanics make up 17 percent of Montgomery County residents, according to the 2010 Census -- more than twice the statewide average. Almost one-third of county residents were not born in the U.S.

"The more you do (in El Salvador), the more likely people are to stay there and to have the kind of independence that they personally want and enjoy in other places around the world," said Leggett.

All trip participants will pay for their own travel expenses. The trip is estimated to cost between \$1,200 and \$1,500, according to a [Maryland Gazette report](#).

The delegation, which will include a local branch of Habitat for Humanity, will learn more about how members can improve "housing and health care" in El Salvador, along with bolstering economic and business development, Leggett said.

"Our belief is as they become more economically independent, people will be able to do many of the things they leave the country for," he said.

Others within the group are looking forward to learning more about the increasingly large segment of Montgomery County residents.

"There is great benefit in understanding the history, economics and all the factors of life in that county," said George Leventhal, an at-large member of the Montgomery County Council. "Where did these new arrivals come from, and why in the last few decades, did the demographics of our region change so rapidly?"

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Trip participants will touch upon the history of the country, Leventhal said, including the 1981 El Mozote massacre, which drove many out of El Salvador.

"There was a flood of refugees in the 80s because of the civil war that was funded, planned and supported by the United States," he said. "It has an enormous relevance for us here in the Washington, D.C. area."

Leventhal, an avid traveler, also said he improves his own governance by observing how foreign politicians operate.

"The wonderful thing about travel is you can't always predict what you'll get out of it," he said.

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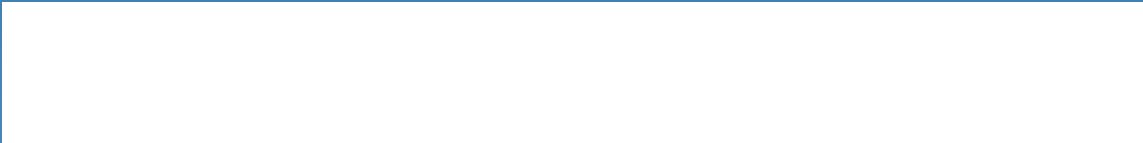
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