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Arizona Torn on Immigrants; In the state that sees half of the unauthorized border crossings in the U.S., residents and officials are unable to reconcile their positions.

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MESA, Ariz.

One minute, Glenna Twing talks about the immigrant residents of the apartment buildings she manages with the warmth typical of Arizona's business-friendly conservatives who cherish immigrant labor. Her tenants, Twing says, are in the country legally and "are hardworking business entrepreneurs who are trying to make a living and contribute back to society."

Another minute, the 60-year-old Arizonan expresses the frustration that has made the state the epicenter of the national backlash against illegal immigration. She refers to the people on downtown streets who she presumes are undocumented with disgust in her voice: "They're standing on the corner, trying to be picked up for day jobs."

With one of every two unauthorized crossings into the U.S. occurring along the 350-mile Arizona-Mexico border, the state might be expected to offer a clear view on the thorny issue of illegal immigration.

Yet the area's sun-splashed shopping centers and subdivisions harbor surprising shades of gray on the issue -- an ambivalence that underscores why Congress has been unable to agree on a new immigration policy.

Arizona's voters approved a ban on benefits for illegal immigrants in 2004, but also express support for pro-immigrant initiatives.

Elected officials are scrambling to prove they are tough on illegal immigration, even as the largely Republican congressional delegation is evenly divided between hard-line and immigrant-friendly proposals being considered in Washington. In Mesa, the two Republican congressmen whose districts divide the city are on opposite sides of the issue.

"The public is quite confused over which way to go," said Earl de Berge, a nonpartisan Arizona pollster.

Last year, House Republicans bucked President Bush's call for a guest-worker program and passed a bill to make all illegal immigrants felons and erect a fence along the Arizona-Mexico border. The GOP-controlled Senate is taking up an alternative proposal that would allow many illegal immigrants to stay in the U.S.

"The split in Arizona reflects the divide in the Republican Party over immigration," said Marshall Wittman, who works for the Democratic Leadership Council in Washington, D.C.

Wittman, formerly an aide to Arizona's Republican Sen. John McCain, said that "immigration is to the Republican Party what trade is to the Democratic Party. It's an issue that splits [the party] and doesn't follow along predictable ideological lines."

Pollsters regularly turn up contradictions in popular sentiment. In one Arizona State University poll last year, 57% of respondents backed the vigilante Minutemen patrolling the border. At the same time, 62% supported an administration-proposed guest-worker program to bring more migrants north -- and 54% backed the program even if it meant allowing some to become permanent residents.

"Everybody's against illegal immigration, but then you ask the follow-up question about what should be done about it, and there's a huge range of opinions," Gov. Janet Napolitano said in an interview. The divide among politicians, she added, "matches public opinion."

Still, Napolitano, a Democrat who has opposed many hard-line efforts on illegal immigration, has steered right on the issue. In January, she called for stationing the National Guard on the border.

Some activists point to the governor's shift as evidence that the public is far less divided on the issue than the state's political elite is.

"All of a sudden, she's become the immigration governor," said Randy Pullen, a member of the Republican National Committee and an activist against illegal immigration. "That's because they have the same polling as the Republican Party does."

Mesa, an economically diverse city of about 400,000 that has been swallowed into the spread of stucco marching east from Phoenix, is a microcosm of the crosscurrents that have pulled Arizona's politicians in divergent directions on the issue.

The city is 80% white, and 8% of its residents are not U.S. citizens, according to the Census Bureau. The familiar pattern of ranch homes and

malls defines most of the town, but in areas near its slightly older downtown, increasing numbers of day laborers linger on the streets.

The two Republican congressmen -- Rep. J.D. Hayworth and Rep. Jeff Flake -- whose districts divide the city, occupy opposite poles of the debate.

Hayworth recently published a book on the perils of illegal immigration, whose title, "Whatever It Takes," sums up his views on the matter. He wants the U.S. military on the border, the 11 million illegal immigrants in the country deported, and the 14th Amendment changed so immigrants can no longer cross the border to have their babies born U.S. citizens on American soil.

"The problem we're having is that most of official Washington views this as a political problem to be managed, rather than an invasion to be stopped," Hayworth said in an interview.

Flake takes a different approach. Along with McCain, he is a prime sponsor of the guest-worker program that would allow most illegal immigrants working in the U.S. to remain. It would also ensure a constant flow of additional laborers that Flake says businesses need to keep the country running.

Flake, who is regularly challenged by anti-immigrant candidates in Republican primaries, acknowledges that many constituents are at first angered by his views, but says that once he explains the complexities of immigration they understand. "We need to be realistic and make a law we can enforce," Flake said. "You either make a statement or you make policy."

Twing, the apartment manager, is active in Republican politics and once ran for the state Legislature in a Republican primary. She said that both congressmen had the right approach. "They both have some fairly good ideas."

At a shopping center near the border between the two congressmen's districts, other Mesa residents also ricocheted between the two stances. "We obviously need the workers for a lot of jobs," said Karl Benson, 68. But as a retired schoolteacher, he has seen the burden that immigrants place on government services, which he thinks should not be extended to illegals.

Steve Grosz, who runs a deejay company, agrees. "I hate to see anybody suffer for coming into our country, but you go to a hospital and the taxpayers are paying the bills for it," the 34-year-old said.

Grosz admitted to a second qualm about illegal immigrants, a common refrain in a town whose population grew 10% in the last four years. "There are too many people moving here, legally or not," said Grosz, who has lived in Mesa for 15 years.

Danean Cummins was born in Mesa, and she also doesn't like the changes. "All my family -- who're all natives -- we go to property we used to own and it's all strip malls," the 38-year-old homemaker said. "You go to the malls and they're covered in Spanish. It's hard not to get prejudiced."

Cummins is convinced that her neighbors are in the country illegally. She complains that they work on cars on their lawn, but her calls to authorities have produced no results.

The Latino population in the Phoenix area has quadrupled since 1980, and surveys show that Arizonans significantly overestimate how many of those new residents are in the state illegally. Some Mesa business owners fear an overreaction to that demographic shift may hurt the economy.

"Why do we let the Cubans and the Asians come in, and we're making such a big deal about the Mexicans?" asked one 58-year-old contractor who did not give his name because he admitted to employing illegal immigrants. The contractor said his employees were worried about rising anger in Arizona and had stopped traveling for fear of being caught by the Border Patrol. "I can't get them to go to Tucson or to Yuma," he said.

Other residents don't see what the fuss is about illegal immigration. Said Christina Eide, 44, a music teacher who lives in a predominantly Latino neighborhood: "My heart goes out to a lot of those people, because they just want to work."