

NEWS

## **ATLANTA OLYMPICS: How Olympics drew Latinos to Atlanta: Experts say call for labor was milestone in region's demographics.**

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The Olympic Games were just a year away. Construction of Olympic venues was behind schedule. Organizers were desperate for construction workers to finish the work.

The way Teodoro Maus recalls it, that's when he got a call from a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service official.

"He told me, 'We want to let you know we are not going to do any enforcement from now until the end of the Olympics,'" said-Maus, then Mexico's consul general in Atlanta. And he wanted Maus to spread the word.

Though unstated, the message to Maus was clear: Atlanta and the federal government were willing

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»How the 1996 Olympics boosted local businesses, A13 to look the other way while immigrants -- some of whom would be in the United States illegally -- bailed the city out of a jam.

Thousands of Mexican laborers responded to the call, drawn by jobs paying substantially more than they could make in their own country. What Atlanta didn't anticipate, Maus said, was this: Many of those immigrants would stay.

Though other factors played a role, immigration experts say the 1996 Olympics was a milestone in the demographic transformation of metro Atlanta. Traditionally, the region's population, politics and culture were viewed through a prism of black and white. Today, Asian and Latino immigrants have made the Capital of the New South a genuine melting pot.

And the transformation continues. According to the Atlanta Regional Commission, whites have already lost their status as the majority of residents in the 10-county area -- they were just 43 percent of residents in 2015. By 2040, they will account for just a third of metro Atlanta residents, ARC projects.

Leading the minority boom are recent arrivals of Hispanic origin. The region's Hispanic population will grow by nearly 822,000 over the next quarter century, according to ARC. By 2040, Hispanics will account for 23 percent of the region's population. They'll be 37 percent of Gwinnett County's population, and more than 20 percent of the population in Cobb, DeKalb and Clayton counties.

Some residents are concerned about the demographic transformation. David Hancock, co-chairman of the United Tea Party of Georgia, cited the burden of immigrants on schools and other government services, as well as the cultural

changes they have brought.

"It seems like that's hurting the fabric of our culture," Hancock said. "We're losing the sense of American identity."

Others see immigrants as a source of the region's strength.

"It's been a great thing for Georgia, no question, from an economic perspective," said Jeffrey Humphreys, an economist at the University of Georgia.

One thing is certain: Latino immigrants are transforming Atlanta, and the Olympics played a key role in that transformation.

Many factors behind immigration

The games weren't the only catalyst for Latino immigration, according to **Julie Weise**, assistant professor of history at the University of Oregon, who has studied immigration in the South.

Weise said the Atlanta economy was booming in the 1990s just as jobs were becoming scarcer in places like California and Texas, where Mexican migrants had traditionally come to work. Poultry plants, construction companies and other firms recruited Latinos to Georgia.

Federal law also played a role. In 1994, the Clinton administration increased border enforcement--something the United States had hardly done before, Weise said.

For the first time, it became difficult for migrant workers to cross into the United States, she said. But it also became difficult for them to return to their families.

"Now it becomes a choice," Weise said. "Either you settle back in Mexico with your family or you bring your family with you to the United States."

For many, the choice was easy. Atlanta was booming. Construction and other jobs were plentiful. And the suburbs offered good schools and affordable housing.

In short, Weise said, Latinos came to Atlanta for the same reasons everyone comes here.

The desperate need for Olympic construction workers only added to Atlanta's appeal, said Mary Odem, associate professor of history at Emory University.

"With the building of stadiums, the growth of the city was really intensified during that period," Odem said. "Employers and even the government are actively seeking laborers, reaching out and getting the word out that labor is needed here.

"Once some laborers get the word, they begin recruiting friends and family members to come," she said.

Maus saw it happening in real time.

"They're coming not for one month, but for a long time," he recalled. "Long enough that people started buying houses or building houses. They stayed and started lives, making \$5.50 or \$6-something an hour. That was quite a bit more than they could make in Mexico."

Enforcement suspended

Word that immigration enforcement would be suspended also helped.

"People knew that, as long as they had a job, they had work, it didn't matter if they had a green card or not," Maus said.

That angers but does not surprise Hancock. He called the region's political and business leaders hypocrites.

"I believe in enforcing the laws of our country," he said. "It's just a symptom of what happens all the time. They decide

the rules are going to inconvenience them, they decide to waive the rules."

The Immigration and Nationalization Service was disbanded in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. A regional spokesman for one of federal agencies that replaced it, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said it did not "have any record that far back for an agency that no longer exists" and could not speak to Maus' claim.

Maus declined to name the INS official he said told him the agency would suspend enforcement.

Twenty years later, Latinos have become an established presence in Georgia. According to UGA's Humphreys, Latinos had \$18.5 billion in buying power in Georgia last year -- about 5.1 percent of the state's total disposable personal income. That's up substantially from \$1.3 billion in buying power -- or 1.3 percent of the total -- in 1990.

"From an economic perspective, it's a no-brainer," Humphreys said. "You want to encourage immigration."

Nonetheless, immigration remains a contentious issue -- one that continues to roil American politics from local sheriff's departments to the presidential election.

Maus said Atlanta sometimes is not as welcoming to Latinos as it was when Olympic organizers needed their help. His response to those who want Latinos to go away?

"You were the one that called us, Georgia," he said.

(Box)

**GEORGIA'S BOOMING LATINO POPULATION** Georgia's Latino population has risen dramatically over the last 25 years.

Year 1990 2000 2010 2015

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

Population 108,922 435,227 853,689 955,434 % of total population 1.7% 5.3% 8.8% 9.4%

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