

Growing Influence, Big Plans Indo-American Group: A Dinner Friday Will Draw Big Names To Fremont.

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Attorney General Bill Lockyer is scheduled to attend. So is state Sen. Liz Figueroa, and Assemblyman John Dutra, and Milpitas Mayor Henry Manayan.

The high-powered guest list for a dinner Friday in the Fremont hills is an obvious sign that the Indo-American Community Federation is an organization with clout, even though most local residents have never heard of the non-profit group.

But the federation has more than political influence, it has ambitious goals. Members dream about building an Indo-American community center in Fremont and dealing with the gang problem within their community. They want to become "part and parcel" of mainstream America. "We cannot make our own island here, we cannot just feel we are financially successful, academically successful and we are successful in our businesses," said Jeevan Zutshi, a civil engineer and president of the 3 year old federation. "No, that is not enough. You have to do something. You have to create opportunities (for Indo-Americans) to get out into the community and get involved in the mainstream."

An estimated 65,000 Indo-Americans live in the Bay Area. The 1990 census counted about 5,500 in Fremont -- a number that has almost certainly grown over the last decade. Zutshi said the purpose of the dinner is to celebrate the victories of the local elected officials last year and give the business community and Indo-Americans an opportunity to meet with them and find out about their jobs.

Among those also expected to attend the dinner at Zutshi's house are Fremont Mayor Gus Morrison, BART Director Tom Blalock, Fremont school board member Anna Muh, Fremont Councilwoman Judy Zlatnik and Fremont City Manager Jan Perkins. "I'm pleased to see them get involved," Zlatnik said. "I think it's really important for groups with such large populations in the community to become part of the political life of the city."

The federation has about 100 active members and more supporters. Its goal is to assimilate into the mainstream culture while preserving and celebrating Indian culture, according to Zutshi, a naturalized citizen who is a civil engineer. Indo-Americans, Zutshi said, should not only have a voice in how their community is run, but should contribute to the well-being of the community. "I think that's great," said San Carlos resident Minu Mathur, another federation member. "We live here, we work here and we earn a living here. We owe it to the community here to contribute to the community. Organizing fundraisers for people back in India and religious activities are not the only things we should be doing."

Mathur is undertaking a study of Indo-American gangs. While most youth gangs are from the working and middle classes, the Indo-American gang members are largely affluent and non-violent. Even so, gangs are a troubling trend for the community. Mathur plans to talk with gang experts in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, as well as to Indo-American youths. "This is something I want to look into more so we can come up with some preventive measures -- direct intervention at the high school level, where the gangs are being formed," said Mathur, a sociology professor at California State University-Hayward.

Zutshi practices what he preaches. He is an active member of the Fremont Chamber of Commerce, the Tri-City Transit Advisory Committee and the Downtown Plan Advisory

Committee, which is studying the creation of a downtown Fremont. And he has hosted organized fundraisers for local and state candidates. Twice a year, federation members bring food and clothing to homeless shelters in Fremont and San Francisco. And the organization has big dreams. "The goal is to build an Indo-American community center, . . . which will be like a Jewish community center," Zutshi said. The center would become a focal point for the Indo-American community, a place for language, cultural and youth classes.

The organization is looking at leasing space for the initial center, but Zutshi hopes to one day raise enough money to build one. Though the organization itself stays out of politics, Zutshi is a staunch Democrat who hosted fundraisers for Lockyer, Dutra and Zlatnik last year. Other Indo-Americans have supported Republican candidates. This activism has raised the profile of the Indo-American community at large in statewide politics. Liz Fenton, Figueroa's chief of staff, said the senator is well aware of the federation and other Indo-American groups in her district. "The Indian community just in general has become very, very politically active over the last few years," Fenton said. "They are very up to speed on legislative stuff that is going on. They're one of the ethnic groups that is very organized."