

Voting on the Municipal ID Card for Middletown Speech

Given by Mayor Joseph M. DeStefano on November 5, 2018

There has been some controversy and many questions regarding the Municipal ID Cards. The Common Council has examined my proposal, reviewed what other communities are doing, held public sessions and received input from our residents and all concerned.

So exactly what is this Municipal ID card, who will want one, who needs one?, and so many other questions have been asked and answered - and that brings us to tonight.

I have said from the beginning that this Municipal ID has different meanings to different people depending on your personal circumstances.

First of all, it hurts no one for us to do this. So many communities throughout the country have this in place, and they have seen benefits in areas such as police and community relations.

Since April 2011 the Mercer County Area Community ID Card has been issued with the endorsement of the offices of the Mercer County Sheriff, the Mercer County Prosecutor, and the police departments of several municipalities. The card is issued by the non-profit Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund (LALDEF) and is accepted by law enforcement agencies, municipal agencies, clinics, hospitals, libraries, social service agencies, and many stores and banks. Although it is not an official government ID card, it facilitates access to basic community services.

That would be a long term goal of our program. Of course, it would be up to the individual agencies as to whether they would accept the card here, but I would hope that after the adoption of this program a focus would be put on libraries, for example, to accept it. Our city agencies will accept the IDs. To maximize the success of the card, programs can be developed to offer discounts to restaurants, city park rentals, and/or price reductions on seasonal passes to our summer programs and pools.

Under Section 325-4, Section C, the security protections for the IDs would include watermarks or other methods, along with bar codes. The success will depend on the creativity of the public and private sector. Maybe it will be a benefit to certain businesses that adopt a program to market to them, maybe not. Again, this hurts no one.

We will also utilize the IDs to identify volunteers on our boards. Currently, only some of our board members carry ID cards and this is one we give to our Fire Police. Again, the card means different things to different people.

With the national immigration debate hitting new lows, we must also recognize and acknowledge that this card will help undocumented people who are living here now.

For us, and we have heard it here from Board Members, the ability to provide proof of identity is something we take for granted. But it's not only undocumented people who face this difficulty - many seniors do also.

We have heard from many in our community that they understand the concerns raised by Alderman Masi, and rightly so, that this may be a tool for Immigration officials to find them. They understand that there are risks, but they can also be reassured that this city government will utilize the courts to protect this information if necessary.

Imagine the fear of leaving your home for a gallon of milk, and find yourself unable to identify who you are to local police - either as a victim or witness to a crime. This should concern us. This alone should justify us doing this. But this inability to provide proof of identity impacts every aspect of their lives, 24/7. How can giving them some comfort in their lives, some sense of safety in their homes, and removing some semblance of fear from their kids' eyes be bad?

So I have talked about what the IDs are; here's what they are not.

1. No reference is made to one's immigration status.

We will get a sense of where the nation is on this issue tomorrow, but as that debate continues let's do what we can here to make Middletown stand out as a community that is welcoming.

2. You must be a city resident to receive one and certain types of ID must be presented to be approved.
3. They can only be used for the purpose of proving identity.
4. You cannot legally drive or use it to fly on airlines
5. The IDs cannot be used to get a driver's license
6. The IDs do not authorize you to work
7. The IDs cannot be used to register to vote and do not change your immigration status.
8. If you commit a crime you will be prosecuted.

I want to ensure the public on both sides of this issue that I and all the members of the Common Council have listened intently for a number of months about your concerns. Like the national debate, there have been many comments about this program that are just not true and I hope that I have clarified them for you. Many residents had legitimate concerns and questions and I hope we have addressed them for you and relieved your concerns.

I need to share one of the conversations that I had with a guy I grew up with in Middletown. He had concerns and some of them mirrored the national debate about immigration. We were on opposite sides of the national discussion and the conversation was going nowhere. I then reminded him of something that has always stuck in the back of my mind about him. Over the years he always told me about his Mom, now in her 90's, a graduate of MHS, who is proud of her Italian ancestry, but had refused to attend any of her high school reunions.

She had a successful professional career, raised a beautiful family, she had 4 kids and many nieces and nephews in our ethnic neighborhood growing up. She's a lifelong resident and loves Middletown. I asked him, "Do you remember why your mother didn't attend those reunions?" He remembered. Throughout school, as the child of a poor immigrant family living in an immigrant neighborhood, the pain caused by the mistreatment of many never left her.

We have an opportunity to change the story of many people and children in our city.

When they look back at tonight's vote they will know that the elected representatives and the overwhelming majority of residents in our city cared enough about them to recognize them as people, as members of our community, and that they are welcome in the City of Middletown.

Tonight's vote will demonstrate who and what we are as elected officials representing the City of Middletown.

Thank you.