

WL mulls becoming a refuge for immigrants

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Officials in West Lafayette will consider declaring the city a refuge for immigrants — one step short of becoming a sanctuary city.

On Monday, the West Lafayette City Council will review a resolution that labels the city a “machaseh,” a biblical word meaning refuge or shelter, for noncitizens.

David Sanders, an at-large council member, said the resolution is meant to reassure people from West Lafayette and Purdue University who are fearful in the wake of President Donald Trump’s recent immigration directives and his pledge to deport illegal immigrants living in the U.S.

The faculty senate at Purdue, which boasts at least the fourth largest international enrollment among public universities, recently passed a similar resolution voicing for support for immigrants.

“We do have students who are either undocumented or are the children of undocumented immigrants, and they’re very scared right now,” said Sanders, who is also chair of the faculty senate. “There’s a lot of trepidation about what’s going to happen, and I think it’s important to reassure them that the city and university are going to do whatever we can to make sure that they are not targeted for legal action.”

The resolution would prohibit any city employee from investigating the immigrant status of a West Lafayette resident unless required by a court order.

Such probing, the document states, would diminish “the police-community relationships built up over the years with the immigrant community.”

West Lafayette police Chief Jason Dombkowski agreed that those connections are vital in encouraging diverse populations to report crimes and cooperate with law enforcement.

But Dombkowski said he needs more time to determine whether or not the resolution hampers the agency’s ability to enforce state law.

“Some of the language in here we’re going to have to clarify and look at what that does to operations,” he said.

The resolution also opposes Trump’s plan to strip federal funding from sanctuary cities.

The declaration stops short of designating West Lafayette a “sanctuary” for immigrants, and it is not meant to defy state and federal laws, Sanders noted.

West Lafayette benefits from federal funding to hire police officers and fire fighters, as well as make infrastructure improvements, Mayor John Dennis told the Journal & Courier Feb. 6.

“We are going to maintain our rights and our responsibilities at the city level,” Sanders said.

Council member Peter Bunder said the resolution is based on similar steps taken in Indianapolis and Urbana, Ill.

“We’re trying to do a public action that says we are an inclusive city and that we understand there are vulnerable young adults and families,” he said. “To the best of our ability, we would like to stand with them.”

The West Lafayette City Council will review the proposal during its common council meeting at 6:30 p.m. Monday at the Morton Community Center.

The resolution can be passed on its first reading with a majority vote, Bunder said.

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A sign welcomes people to West Lafayette.

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