

West Lafayette just shy of a sanctuary city

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At one point Monday night, more than an hour into testimony in West Lafayette, those speaking in favor of a contentious, pro immigrant resolution started being intercepted by a man wearing full police blues, stationed along the only convenient escape route from the Morton Community Center lectern. Many of those testifying were immigrants, of various statuses — naturalized citizens who graduated from local high schools; Purdue grads who had been brought to the United States as children of undocumented parents; international students dealing with uncertain status. Some told the city council fully fleshed stories about how they got to West Lafayette, there among a crowd that spilled into the hallway. Others refused to give more than a first name for fear of prosecution as they said that, yes, reassuring words from city leaders would go a long way in these uncertain days.

In the back of the room, West Lafayette Police Chief Jason Dombkowski stopped each one as they stepped away after an allotted three minutes to read into the public record.

“Well stated, sir,” Dombkowski told one speaker who only identified himself to the council as Hector.

The scene played out about a dozen times Monday night, serving as a portrait of the fine line the city council walked on a resolution designed to make West Side something just short of a sanctuary city.

On one hand, facing a resolution meant to protect immigrants from any undue local and federal harassment, Dombkowski told the council in no uncertain terms that his officers would follow the law — including when the department is asked to assist federal authorities. That, he said, was state law. His officers were sworn to uphold it.

On the other, there was Dombkowski shaking hands to punctuate what he’s been saying in the week since five Democrats on the nine-member city council sponsored a resolution to create a “machaseh for immigrants” — a Hebrew word for shelter.

“We are a welcoming city,” Dombkowski said. “I think we’ve proved that, time and time again, through the years. Resolution or no resolution, that doesn’t change for us.”

As for the city council, the balance tipped to the side of welcome — the vote: 6-3 — on a night when defiance of Donald Trump’s version of the federal authority made its way into the West Lafayette books.

“I never in my life, as a public servant, thought I’d have to be talking about how we’re going to fight the federal government — how we’re going to deal with our federal government, that the federal government is making change that causes fear among the folks who live in the boundaries of this country,” Mayor John Dennis said. “Just blows my mind.”

The resolution — coming on the same day as a revised temporary travel ban for those from six majority-Muslim countries — speaks directly to the realities of Trump directives as well as assumptions about where the White House might turn next.

Specifically, it calls on West Lafayette police to serve and protect immigrants the way they would anyone else; rejects any effort “to create litmus tests or registries ... based on religion or ethnicity;” opposes any plan that threatens to strip federal funds from cities looking to protect undocumented immigrants “and other noncitizen residents” from deportation; stops city employees from asking about or investigating the citizenship or immigration status of anyone, unless it’s part of a criminal investigation or required by state or federal law or court order.

City Attorney Eric Burns massaged the resolution until he could tell council members it did what sponsors asked and still stayed in bounds of state law. Under a 2011 state law, sanctuary cities are outlawed in Indiana. The law prohibits governments from refusing to cooperate with federal immigration authorities to protect non-citizens who are in the United States without legal permission.

That said, Burns told the council, there’s a legal analysis and then there’s a political reality. A President Trump executive order in January threatened to strip federal funds from sanctuary cities. Dennis said Monday the city received between \$1.5 million and \$2 million in federal funds each year. And Burns said there was some debate whether moves by individual cities might jeopardize federal funds statewide.

“In the current environment,” Burns said, “I think we have to exercise caution, because what we might assume ... could have occurred in the past might have changed in the past several months.”

After council member Aseem Jha, R-District 3, made the case for understanding the risks and potential costs for the city, council member Nick DeBoer, D-District 1, practically dared the feds to try.

“Frankly, I don’t care at all what the federal government says about this,” DeBoer said. “This is absolutely necessary to do. This is the moral and right thing to do. ... I’d like to see this in court, if we had the chance.”

Council member Larry Leverenz, D-District 4, followed: “I don’t think this council should be held hostage by what we think may happen. ... I think the community is looking for that reassurance.”

That was the theme of the night.

“It matters. Words are powerful,” said Haroon Mohammad, a West Lafayette resident and naturalized citizen who came as a child from Canada. “People will read something short and sweet like this and think, you know what, our elected officials do care about us. Our elected officials understand our fears and concerns, and they are with us.”

Walking that line, though, was evident in council member Steve Dietrich, R-At Large. A retired police officer, he said he thought the resolution was “too aggressive.” He

made the case that “West Lafayette police weren’t doing anything wrong,” so why put them on the spot? (Domkowski's take: WLPD is well-versed in questions of dealing with non-U.S. citizens via years of working with Purdue's traditionally large international student body.) And Dietrich pressed about why resolution sponsors didn't simply follow the lead of the University Senate, Purdue's faculty body, which essentially reaffirmed existing campus policies and standards about how immigrants should be treated.

“I had my problems with it,” Dietrich said after he joined the council's Democrats in voting for the resolution. “But you can't beat the sentiment.”

David Sanders, D-At Large, is chairman of University Senate, as well. He made the case that things have changed since October and that the city had a greater obligation to make a bigger statement than simply repeating aspirational values. “The situation is different now than it was even in October,” Sanders said after the vote. “People have real fear and concern. How can we ignore that? ... I actually think the most important thing was the participation of the community. They were far more eloquent than I or the other members of the council could ever be. Even if it hadn't passed, just hearing those stories would have been an amazing experience.

“So the fact that it did pass was just a measure of the West Lafayette community.”

Nearby, Dombkowski was shaking hands with another person who testified — walking that fine line of welcome and a sworn obligation of the law.

That was the scene from West Lafayette, not quite a sanctuary city.

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JEREMY ERVIN/JOURNAL & COURIER

West Lafayette Mayor John Dennis addresses a packed house regarding the city's policies and obligations regarding undocumented immigrants during the West Lafayette City Council meeting on Monday in West Lafayette.