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# L.A. council approves ID cards for city residents

**The cards could be used by illegal immigrants to open bank accounts, borrow library books and pay utility bills. There would also be a separate debit card feature that users could pre-load with cash.**

By Catherine Saillant, Los Angeles Times

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Los Angeles City Council members Wednesday gave enthusiastic backing to the creation of a controversial city identification card that could be used by illegal immigrants to open bank accounts, borrow library books and pay utility bills.

Councilman Ed Reyes called it a way for the city's poorest workers to "come out into the light."

While the federal government has failed to pass immigration reform, the city of Los Angeles is able to manage its own affairs, said Councilman Richard Alarcon, who along with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is a chief sponsor of the card plan.

An ID card that would allow as many as 400,000 residents who now live in a cash economy to access banking services and learn the intricacies of finance is beneficial to everyone, Alarcon said, not just undocumented immigrants, who are expected to be the main benefactors.

"Everyone has used their service at one time or another," he said. "And yet we don't want them to say who they are and what their address is."

Councilman Dennis Zine, echoing others, said he didn't see a downside to the cost-neutral program. "It will help people use a system that is there for them to use and hopefully not abuse," he said.

The 12-1 vote to pursue selecting a vendor to develop and administer the identity card program was a bittersweet victory for Alarcon, who is serving his last term on the council. On Tuesday, voters rejected his bid for a state Assembly seat, leaving him with no public office after next June for the first time in 19 years.

Council President Herb Wesson lauded Alarcon for coming to City Hall to push for the ID card program just hours after he had learned of his defeat.

"It takes a courageous man to come here today," Wesson said. "Your loss is a loss to the state government and a loss to the people of Los Angeles."

Alarcon, bags under his eyes, left quickly after the vote. His Assembly campaign was complicated by the fact that he and his wife face fraud and perjury charges alleging that they did not live in the council district he represents.

Republican Councilman Mitch Englander cast the sole "no" vote, saying the city is in too tough of a financial bind to take on a new program. Though city staff said the program would be self-sustaining through fees charged to obtain a card, Englander said he questioned whether that was true.

"This is starting an entirely new program in Los Angeles when we are at the fiscal cliff," Englander said. "It think it's important to focus on our core functions ... before expanding into services that aren't under our purview."

The photo ID would be available to any resident of the city, regardless of immigration status. Holders could use the card not only as identification but to check out library books, pay bills, make reservations and use city job centers.

The cards would also carry a separate debit card feature that users could pre-load with cash. Oakland, Richmond and San Francisco already have similar cards.

Opponents of illegal immigration have lambasted the cards as an accommodation to lawbreakers. But no one spoke in opposition to the Los Angeles initiative Wednesday.

An array of speakers from civil rights, labor and ethnic organizations urged the council to move forward. Betty Hung, policy director at the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, said a municipal identification card would ease hurdles for immigrants.

For instance, she said, some schools won't release kids into the custody of someone who has no identification.

"Many parents have difficulty picking their children up from school because they don't have IDs," she said.

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