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TOP STORY

Madison's 'welcoming community' resolution adopted

By CHRISTINE LEE Staff Writer Feb 7, 2017



A large crowd packed the council chambers at the Hartley Dodge Memorial Building Monday night as the Borough Council adopted its 'welcoming community' resolution.

Photos by Christine Lee

MADISON - Amid the controversy and court challenges surrounding President Donald Trump's immigration ban — and despite some doubts expressed in Madison on Monday night — the Borough Council adopted a resolution affirming Madison's values to be a welcoming community to all.

By a 5-0 vote with one abstention, the council adopted the resolution that ensures everyone feels they belong in the borough — regardless of what country they hail from — at a special council meeting Monday night.

Republican Councilman Patrick Rowe abstained, stating that Madison can't set an immigration policy.

"We simply have to follow the government's guidelines," Rowe said.

He also expressed concern that the council wouldn't be able to satisfy everyone.

Monday's vote was carried by Council President Carmela Vitale and council members Astri Baillie, Robert Landrigan, Ben Wolkowitz and Maureen Byrne.

The resolution expresses Madison's "equal, respectful and dignified treatment of all people, regardless of their immigration status."

"The Borough of Madison has long embraced and welcomed individuals of diverse racial, ethnic, religious and national backgrounds," the resolution reads.

Residents, clergy from the area and students packed the council chambers in the Hartley Dodge Memorial Building at 50 Kings Road to express support for the resolution.

Some 10 people addressed the council on the resolution. While most expressed their support, some said they found it too vague and implored borough officials to start a conversation on the issue. A volunteer translator, Carol Ruiz, was on hand to assist some of those who spoke.

Under the resolution, all departments, employees and officials in Madison can't take actions that profile, or register, individuals based on their religion, race, ethnicity, national origin or immigration status.

Mayor Robert Conley noted that Madison's resolution is modeled after a similar one adopted in the town of Maplewood in Essex County. He added that Madison's resolution would be shared with all municipalities in Morris County.

"It is not fair and it is not right to be judged by the color of our skin, the sound of our name, the neighborhood we live in, the church, temple, or mosque we may attend, or even the fact that we choose not to attend a house of worship," Conley remarked in a prepared statement. "It is certainly not right to be judged by the country we may come from or the war that we seek refuge from."

"It was not right when our country was founded and it is not right today."

He added that "each wave of immigration has made our country stronger," noting Madison's immigrant history as the "Rose City."

"A hundred years ago, immigrants manned the rose farms in Madison, making its mark in the world, they helped build the estates in the area," Conley observed. "And today, they are at our schools, they are working together to make Madison a better place."

Continue Services

The resolution further adds that "no department, employee or official of the Borough of Madison shall condition the provision of borough services or benefits on matters related to citizenship or immigration status."

It asks borough employees to monitor any efforts by the federal government to withhold or withdraw federal funding as a result of the policies in the resolution. The resolution also notes that borough employees should look at any efforts by the federal government to "expend borough funds or resources to enforce federal immigration laws" and to "take action to appeal or challenge any such requirement."

"Nothing in this resolution shall be construed or implemented to conflict with any obligation imposed by federal or state statutes, applicable regulations and directives of the New Jersey attorney general and the Morris County Prosecutor," the resolution adds.

The resolution also asks the Madison Police Department to continue community policing and sensitivity training for all its members.

Resident Christina D'Amato, who is studying immigration law at Rutgers University, said she believes the resolution doesn't go far enough to serve the community.

She noted that the portion of the resolution dealing with federal statutes is vague, adding that it “doesn’t really say anything about what you will do if the federal government decides.”

“It doesn’t protect their privacy rights, it doesn’t protect them from fearing coming to work,” D’Amato said. “I think a lot of people are very troubled by the lack of specificity in this resolution.”

Madison Junior School sixth grader Claudia Sydenstricker, 11, also expressed concern about the same portion of the resolution.

“Are we really going to protect these immigrants, are we really going to protect the community?” she asked. “Or are these just empty words and slightly dangerous words that won’t protect our community?”

Both Claudia’s parents, Stuart Sydenstricker and Diana Mejia, are immigrants from Brazil and Colombia, respectively. Both were undocumented at one point, the sixth grader noted. All three attended the council meeting as representatives from the Morristown-based Wind of the Spirit Immigrant Resource Center.

Stuart Sydenstricker presented a petition with 100 signatures to the council, asking the governing body to start a conversation on immigration and inclusiveness.

“If we can talk honestly about it, if I can listen to you and see why you don’t like me, we can make a difference,” he implored the council. “Why don’t we take the opportunity to have an honest conversation and let the ghosts come out of the closet.”

Sydenstricker said the resource center has been working with communities statewide to pass “sanctuary” or “welcoming” proposals. Hearing about Madison’s resolution last Friday was “scary,” as the resolution was being passed without any dialogue, he informed the council.

Through the translator, Diana Mejia emotionally recalled her journey as an undocumented immigrant from Colombia. She told the council her brother was tortured and assassinated, and her uncle was assassinated as well.

“It is my responsibility to share this with you tonight because the community we live in is a community that lives in fear,” Mejia said through the translator. “We fear that in your willingness to do something quickly, you took a resolution from another place.”

Through a translator, Mejia said other Morris County towns have tried to make local police “immigration agents.”

“They will take Madison’s resolution and use it as an example and pass a resolution that does not protect the community,” she added.

International Students

The resolution notes that the borough welcomes international students studying at Drew University at 36 Madison Ave.; Fairleigh Dickinson University’s College at Florham at 285 Madison Ave.; and the College of Saint Elizabeth at 2 Convent Road in the Convent Station section of Morris Township.

The presidents of all three colleges reaffirmed their campus’ commitment to welcoming all in messages to their campus communities.

The colleges’ messages, and the council’s resolution, come in the wake of President Donald Trump’s executive order blocking residents of seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States.

Trump’s executive order suspends entry of all refugees who want to resettle in the United States for 120 days, and bars refugees from Syria indefinitely. It also prohibits nearly all citizens from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen from entering the United States for 90 days.

Officials at all three local colleges have indicated they do not have students or staff members from any of the affected countries.

Since it was signed by President Trump on Friday, Jan. 27, the order has sparked demonstrations throughout the country and led to a court order to halt the deportations, at least as far as they pertained to passengers left stranded at JFK International Airport that Friday night.

“Fostering a relationship of trust, respect and open communication between borough officials and residents is essential to delivering effective public services and maintaining a high quality of life and the sense of community we value so highly in Madison,” the council’s resolution states.

Two Drew University seniors, Hannah Kohn of New York City and Jonathan Van Dongen of Hackettstown, expressed their support for the resolution and urged the council to begin a dialogue.

"I ask that you remain invested in our diverse community and the passage of a resolution which supports that," Kohn, who is studying women's and gender studies, remarked. "I'm also interested and concerned about next steps and look forward to learning more about your plans."

Van Dongen, a psychology and political science major at Drew, said he has counseled friends and colleagues at Drew on their fears related to immigration rules passed by the federal government.

"To pass laws, to pass resolutions without conversation will only result in further disarray, and I would like to see this as one of many steps toward an increasingly inclusive community," Van Dongen said. "I would like to see this as one of many steps toward an increasingly inclusive community."

Steps Forward

The Rev. Teresa Rushdan, senior pastor of Bethel AME Church at 53 Central Ave., praised Mayor Conley for doing "an outstanding job" to make Madison a welcoming community.

"While it has many grey areas, (this resolution) is an opportunity to close and slam the door shut on racism, evil and strife and to open the door for times such as this, to get everything started," Rushdan said. "If we keep up the good work, the good fight of faith, if show up when asked, when you come to the table when you ask us, we'll be there."

The Rev. Scott Foster, senior pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Madison at 19 Green Ave., echoed similar praise for the resolution.

The public comments concluded with a round of applause from the packed council chambers to those who spoke.

Prior to the resolution's adoption, several council members shared their stories of immigration in their families, including Council President Carmela Vitale and Councilwoman Astri Baillie. Vitale said members of the Madison's Hispanic community were invited to the Hartley Dodge

Memorial Building to hear from department heads.

"We have been trying very hard to get some of our population involved in some of our commissions," the council president observed.

Councilmen Robert Landrigan and Ben Wolkowitz shared their concerns on actions undertaken in the federal government. Landrigan referred to President Donald Trump as a "bully."

"The longer you go without making that statement, the harder it is to stop him and then it grows and grows," Landrigan remarked. "I don't like what's going on."

Wolkowitz agreed, referring to what is going on in Washington, D.C., as "scary."

Conley responded to criticisms of the resolution by stating that while he still believed the resolution should be passed, he acknowledged that the conversation should continue.

"This is not going to be an easy conversation," the mayor noted. "It's going to be very difficult, especially if people are honest. And we need that honest conversation."

He proposed having a "town hall"-style meeting to formulate the next steps, asking anyone interested to email him at mayor@rosenet.org, with "Madison Welcoming Community" in the subject line.

Conley said he anticipates pulling together a group "in the coming weeks" to begin a dialogue on what to do next.

"This is the starting point," he promised.

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