

Despite being tabled, Holyoke proposal about its sanctuary city status faces protest

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HOLYOKE — Soon after the U.S. Department of Homeland Security included Holyoke on its now-retracted list of sanctuary cities, city councilors Kevin Jourdain and Linda Vacon filed a proposed order in June. Holyoke is not a sanctuary city, it said.

At stake, they said, was the \$10 million of federal money that flows to the city's schools and police and other departments. Weeks later and the proposal has languished on the City Council's agenda.

While it is pending before the council's Development and Governmental Relations subcommittee, the matter will be administratively tabled at Tuesday's meeting, according to the [meeting's agenda](#).

That will not stop the protest planned outside City Hall that evening.

Claire McGale, who is helping organize [the protest](#) with Real Majority Holyoke, said other protest groups from around the region are planning to attend to voice displeasure about a measure she says is akin to rolling out the welcome carpet for federal immigration officials.

"When the message we're sending is we are not a sanctuary city and that message is being given directly to the Department of Homeland Security, the effect is like, 'Please tell us what we need to do to comply,'" McGale said.

The proposed order says that once it is adopted, a copy would be sent to the lawmakers representing Massachusetts in Congress, the White House and the Department Homeland Security.

McGale said her group supports following the law but is concerned that the language of the law isn't what it seems. She said it's better if the proposal is tabled in subcommittee.

"It gives us more time to talk about it," McGale said, "more time to look at the implications and more time to tell the people of Holyoke what they're trying to do, because nobody knew about it."

Trump's list

In late May, the Trump administration named Holyoke among the 11 municipalities in Massachusetts that, according to President Donald Trump's [executive order](#) on the matter, "obstruct the enforcement of Federal immigration laws." The Trump administration has since revised the list. As of last month, it administration deems only one Massachusetts city – Boston – to be a [sanctuary jurisdiction](#).

On Thursday, the Department of Justice [sued Boston and its officials](#) saying the federal government is hampered in its immigration enforcement there by the city's policies.

Homeland Security referred questions about Holyoke's inclusion on the original list to the Department of Justice.

Soon after the list was published, Mayor Joshua [Garcia disputed his city's inclusion](#), saying there was no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a sanctuary city.

City Councilor Jourdain said he and Vacon filed the proposal so that the City Council would stand with the mayor — and head off the possibility of losing federal funding over a misunderstanding.

“We filed this resolution to back him up to say that we’re not a sanctuary city,” Jourdain said. “We want to clarify any misunderstanding that’s out there with federal government.”

Loss of federal funding would be “devastating to the community” of about 38,000, Jourdain said, as the city’s total tax levy is around \$70 million and raising taxes alone would not recoup the loss.

In addition to referencing Garcia’s recent comments, the proposed order points to an ordinance the City Council passed [during Trump’s first term](#) in 2017 that said no city official would knowingly issue an order that violates local, state or federal law.

“The resolution is just sort of reframing actions that have been taken over time that tend to get buried in the big book of ordinances,” Vacon said.

Scant feedback

In the early days of Trump’s first term, then-Mayor Alex Morse said [he would resist efforts](#) by the federal government to deny funding to cities that did not help officials with certain immigration enforcement.

Years earlier in 2014, Morse had issued an executive order preventing city police from fulfilling civil immigration detainer requests. In 2017, the state’s [Supreme Judicial Court ruled](#) police across the state lacked the authority to detain someone based on a federal civil immigration detainer alone.

Vacon and Jourdain said feedback to their proposed order has been quiet among their colleagues, as city councilors have been focused on more pressing issues.

City Councilor Kocayne Givner, who chairs the Development and Governmental Relations subcommittee and sets its agenda, said in an email that a city councilor can make a motion to take up the matter at Tuesday’s meeting. “However, that agenda is already incredibly long,” she wrote.

Asked about Holyoke’s relationship with federal immigration efforts, Garcia said he had reissued Morse’s 2014 executive order in January, which is now backed by state case law.

“As I have stated previously, to my knowledge, there is no universally accepted definition of a ‘sanctuary city,’ and Holyoke does not fit that label,” Garcia said in a statement.

He said his office also looks to the governor’s guidance to help “navigate these complex issues.” Garcia said as mayor, he is concerned about forging trust between local police and city residents.

“Holyoke has a proud history of compassion and inclusion, welcoming newcomers and supporting those in need,” Garcia’s statement said. “However, this does not equate to sanctuary city status; rather, it reflects our commitment to humanitarian values while adhering to state and local laws.”