

Drivers' card debate revs up for fall ballot

BY ALEX ZIELINSKI
STAFF WRITER

M^aya Martinez is never certain that she'll get to class on time, if at all. Martinez, a 20-year-old Portland State University student, lives on a rural farm near Beaverton with her family, five miles from a TriMet bus stop.

Uncomfortable biking or walking on the narrow road, Martinez depends on her mother—the only one in the household with a driver's license—to drop her off at the nearest MAX station on the way to her work if she has time. But soon, this already capricious situation may not be an option.

Martinez's mother, who, like Martinez and the rest of her family, is an undocumented immigrant, has a license issued prior to Oregon's current driver's license laws that require a valid U.S. birth certificate in registering for a card. Later this year, it will expire, along with nearly 8 thousand other Oregonians'.

"After that, I don't know how I'm going to get to school, or even to the grocery store," Martinez said. "I don't want to drive illegally, but if there's an emergency, it's our only option."

However, a measure on November's ballot could ease Martinez's worries. The newly numbered Measure 88 aims to grant drivers cards to Oregon residents without U.S. birth certificates, allowing them to operate a vehicle after passing a regular DMV driver's test. While Gov. John Kitzhaber signed this idea into law last year during a jubilant May Day festival, opponents of the card collected enough signatures to file a referendum in October—putting the card's future in the hands of Oregon voters.

Ten other states have successfully passed similar bills over the recent years, but Oregon will be the first state to bring the issue to the ballot. With the campaigns just out of the gate, advocates and opponents are making sure this election won't go unnoticed.

"Our biggest challenge is making sure the voters know what this measure really is about," said Andrea Miller, director of CAUSA, the Latino advocacy nonprofit behind Measure 88's support team—a campaign now backed by the Portland City Club and Portland Chief of Police Mike Reese. "The ballot title is extremely

confusing, and doesn't reflect the real issue."

Miller said the measure title, "provides Oregon resident 'driver card' without requiring proof of legal presence in the United States," makes it seem too much like an illegal immigration issue. When, in fact, she and other advocates believe it's more a safety issue than anything.

"Bottom line, it's about making sure the other drivers on the road know driving laws and are insured," Miller said. "We want all Oregon drivers to feel safe."

While undocumented Latino immigrants make up a larger portion of those affected, other groups with missing U.S. birth certificates—homeless populations, former foster children, seniors, other undocumented ethnicities—will also take a hit if the measure doesn't pass.

Oregon Voice, a local community-organizing nonprofit focused on underrepresented social groups, supports Measure 88 due to the impact it could have on veteran and homeless populations.

"This would mean people living out of their car could legally move their home," says Iris Hodge, Oregon Voice's Health and Civic Engagement Coordinator. "The homeless community already has so many pressing issues to deal with. If this measure could help keep them out of more trouble, I'm for it." But, Hodge adds, "Cost could definitely be an issue."

"At least one in eight Asian Pacific Islanders in Oregon are undocumented," said Paulo Esteban, a field organizer for the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO). "And so many of our families can't truly thrive without reliable transportation."

But, Esteban adds, safety remains a key issue in APANO's joint campaign with CAUSA.

"Whichever side of the ballot you're on, it's important to note that we all share the road," he said. "And I don't want to risk getting in an accident with an uninsured driver."

However, this is the leading problem Measure 88's challengers have with their opponent's campaign.

"Our opponents have made this a safety issue, but it's just a red herring," said Cynthia Kendoll, president of Oregonians

for Immigration Reform (OFIR), the group responsible for the October referendum.

"This is letting illegal aliens circumvent state laws to move around the country. This is contrary to what our lawmakers should be doing."

Protect Oregon Driver's Licenses—a spinoff political action committee of OFIR—is leading the opposing campaign with backing from a handful of Oregon representatives and a heap of funding from Nevada

conservative Loren Parks—one of the largest individual donors in Oregon politics.

"Giving a driver's card to someone who's here illegally will only increase Oregon's illegal alien population," said PODL spokesman Jim Ludwick. "(Illegal immigrants) have no respect for our laws in the first place—what makes us think they'll follow this one?"

Oregon historically didn't require residents to show a Social Security number or birth certificate when applying for a driver's license. But after the 9/11 attacks sparked a federal crackdown on licensing requirements, former governor Ted Kulongoski followed suit, making Social Security cards mandatory for every driver.

Ludwick said that Gov. Kitzhaber's signing of the 2013 bill is blatantly against the federal government's wishes.

"You can't just pick and choose the laws you want to follow," he said. "Is it going to take another terrorist attack to make us listen?"

CAUSA's Miller said she expects a fight to the ballot box—and it may be ugly.

But a battle's the last thing on Martinez's mind. She'd just like a safe way to get to school.

"I've read the driver's manual. I've taken practice tests, I'm ready to go," she said. "There's just one hurdle left."

"Bottom line, it's about making sure the other drivers on the road know driving laws and are insured. We want all Oregon drivers to feel safe."

— ANDREA MILLER
DIRECTOR, CAUSA



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