

Opinion

National license a danger to basic freedoms

GUEST COMMENTARY

RICHARD SOBEL

Currently, on frigid nights, you can get by bus from Harvard Square to Huron Village quickly, for just a little cash. If you were heading, for instance, to the Tobin School for Congressman Mike Capuano's community meeting during the recent cold spell, that was a convenient option.

Not so, shortly, if an idea for a National Transportation Security

A SID might begin in the current low-tech T-passes and the 2004 Intelligence Reform law passed in the December lame-duck Congress. The law creates a national driver's license by federally enforcing minimum standards on the states. Traditionally, our federal system gives states the decisions about licensing motorists. A coalition of conservatives around New Hampshire Sen. John

Sununu and liberals around New Jersey's Frank Lautenberg thought the section was removed in conference committee. But when President George Bush wanted the Intelligence Bill passed, the provisions ended up there.

A national driver's license is actually the base for a national identification system. It moves toward both a federal travel license and government benefits authorization card. If that legislation, or the more restrictive Sensenbrenner Section 7212 that the House approved in February is fully implemented, an SID would be needed when boarding planes at Logan or Amtrak at South Station.

Eventually, it might be required to rent a car or take the T. It would likely be needed to get federal benefits like Social Security or a U.S. passport. Being asked for your SID could become as common as requests for credit cards.

The convenient T-pass system, soon to be upgraded into the Charlie Card, could be reworked to deny travel to people without an SID. Even if they have cash. On cold nights, they can walk.

Among the wide-ranging town meeting issues Capuano ably handled, from Iraq to taxes, his views on a national driver's license raised questions. He opposes a national ID and no-fly lists. Being on

local and national visitors intent or ible for a national travel on foreign SID won't stop. The Sensenbrenner's extension approach to see mines basic liberties search for safety tries about unbet Sept. 11 suggests of intelligence better head off d

If Section 7212 gives the power to decide on the computer-linked, color-coded system of national driver's license to the Department of Homeland Security. It provides minimal consultation with the states on regulation. And there's no provision for privacy protections.

Cambridge residents may not think travel could be restricted locally. Most of us feel it can't happen here. But didn't the T's plan to ask people for IDs and search their bags during the uneventful DNC raise that specter?

If the national driver's license system becomes a travel license, the simple ride from Harvard Square to West Cambridge could become impossible for some on future frigid nights. The specter of domestic passports could become the harsh reality of a Cyber Winter here.

Americans across the political spectrum oppose the national driver's license for undermining our basic liberties. These range from the American Civil Liberties Union to the American Conservative Union.

Thoughtful people need to recognize we will be the ones to suffer restrictions on our movements. As Ben Fritzsche wrote in the *Chronicle* Sept. 11 over t "They that can g ty to obtain a lit ty deserve neith ty."

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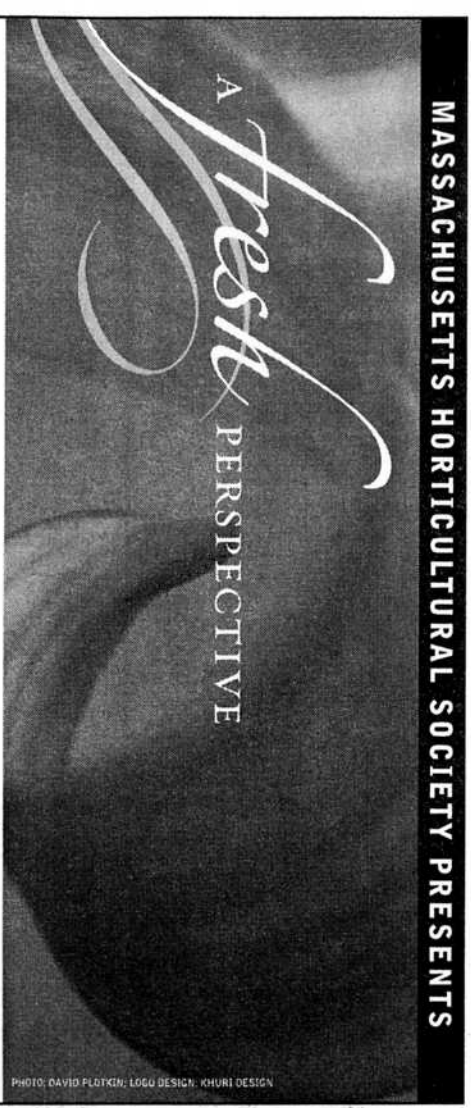


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But Capuano thought national standards for a driver's license and requiring IDs to fly were OK. He voted against the Sensenbrenner extensions, however. Ever since a soldier asked for my papers on a train in still-Communist Hungary in the 1980s, travel credentials have seemed a bad idea. Didn't we mock places like Russia and South Africa for demanding people's papers?

The right to travel is a precious one Americans take for granted

leaders.

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local and national. International visitors intent on harm won't be eligible for a national ID, and could travel on foreign passports. An SID won't stop them.

The Sensenbrenner section is a senseless extension of a flawed approach to security that undermines basic liberties in a simplistic search for safety. As the recent stories about unheeded threats before Sept. 11 suggests, coordinated use of intelligence information could better head off dangers.

If Section 7212 becomes law, the T-Pass could morph into a Travel License or internal passport. We need to address the consequences of a national driver's license now when warmer thoughts are more appealing on cold Cambridge nights.

That chilly week also celebrated patriot Josiah Quincy's birthday. He lived in constantly dangerous times when British troops terrorized the town.

As Ben Franklin famously wrote Cantabridgian Quincy on Sept. 11 over two centuries ago, "They that can give essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Sobel is a Cambridge resident.

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Guest commentaries (700 words) will be considered on a week-by-week basis. Commentaries and letters about Cambridge issues by Cambridge residents will be given priority.

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