Keep moving forward on community IDs

Both grassroots and official support for a community ID program have been growing steadily over the past two years. And it now looks like such Johnson County-issued cards could be in residents’ pockets as early as next spring.

The local discussion about a municipal ID program began in earnest in 2012 when Iowa City’s Human Rights Commission recommended that the city become the first in Iowa — probably the first in the whole Midwest — to offer an official, city-approved identification card. That recommendation was seconded last year by the city’s Ad Hoc Diversity Committee.

The idea is that a community-issued ID card would benefit many local residents who have difficulty obtaining a state driver’s license or ID card. The commission and committee originally expressed interest in such cards as a way of protecting the safety of undocumented immigrants in the city. But the list of potential beneficiaries of such cards has expanded to include:

- The dependents of international students.
- Other immigrants who are in transitional status.
- Victims of domestic abuse or natural disaster who were displaced suddenly from their homes.
- And elderly and low-income residents who have trouble gaining access to the documents needed to obtain a state ID.

More importantly, the discussion has expanded beyond just Iowa City to include Johnson County government as well. And if such IDs are going to have any practical benefit, they will need to be recognized by all levels of government within the region.

Organizers of the initiative say more than 700 people already have expressed interest in obtaining a card when they become available. That number includes many residents who already have a state-issued ID but would want to participate in the program to ensure that it is viable.

There are still many logistical questions to be answered about operating such a program in Johnson County. But the local discussion has benefited greatly from a report on the topic that was compiled for Iowa City government by University of Iowa law students. Produced under the supervision of Stella Burch Elias — a UI law professor who was involved in the launching of an ID program in New Haven, Conn. — the report provides a solid foundation for any local program.

The supporters recognize that no community-issued identity card will grant legal residency or the right to work. But they stress how such cards would help undocumented residents better blend into the local community by granting access to services and places that require some sort of official identification. And they are working to ensure the cards will be attached to enough services and benefits that all local residents — not just immigrants and the homeless — will have cause to obtain them and use them.

Even if the benefits of such a community ID program were limited only to undocumented immigrants living in the shadows of our community, we would still view the proposal as a reasonable, practical step for our community to take while our federal leaders haggle over what constitutes true comprehensive immigration reform.

And with so many other populations likely to benefit from such a card, we’re glad to see the county moving so quickly to help residents who, otherwise, would continue to lack the documentation needed for such common activities as:

- Cashing paychecks or using debit cards.
- Renting an apartment.
- Purchasing medication.
- Or always having to recite a crime.