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Borough eyes rental inspections

 By **CHRISTOPHER RUVO**
 phillyBurbs.com

The name of every man, woman and child living in a rental unit in Quakertown might one day appear on a list at borough hall, officials said.

A provision mandating the list could be written into a new ordinance that would authorize routine inspections of rental properties in the Upper Bucks borough where more than 35 percent of the housing stock is rentals, borough council members said at their Monday meeting.

Councilman Jim Roberts said the list will ensure that the number of people living in an apartment doesn't surpass the amount allowed by code. It will also help make certain that renters are paying earned income tax to the borough and local school district, he said.

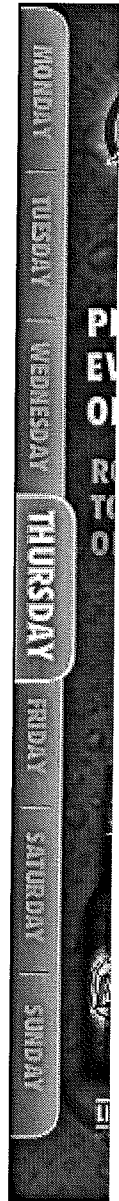
A Quakertown resident said overcrowding in apartments is a growing problem in the borough of about 9,000 people. "People are cluttering up the street and living three or four families in an apartment. That's not safe," the man said.

Roberts said overcrowding "is a source of nuisance for some non-apartment dwellers who perceive there are more people living in a place than are allowed."

Asked if the provision was particularly focused on clamping down on illegal immigrants, Roberts said, "Illegal aliens are a federal issue. We're just concerned with making sure people are paying their wage tax."

Council President Dennis Hallman worried that the list will unfairly target "people with last names" that have "certain connotations."

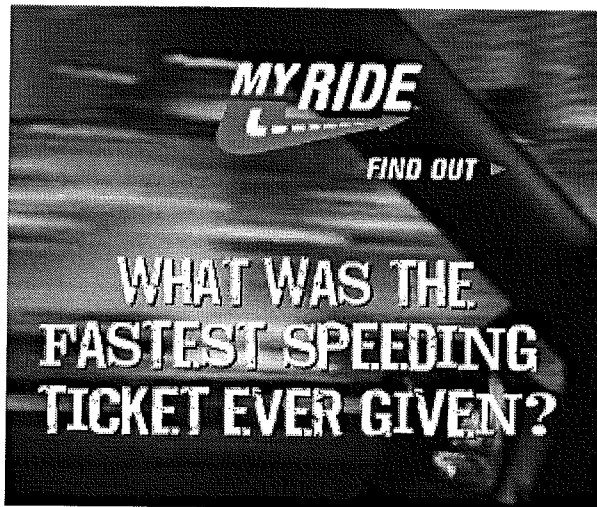
Would-be laws targeting immigrants have touched off heated debate across the nation, including in nearby Hazleton where the city's Illegal


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Immigration Relief Act, which would penalize landlords who rent to illegal immigrants and businesses that hire them, has been at the center of a court battle.

The town was sued by opponents of the measure who claim the ordinance violates residents' constitutional rights, runs afoul of state and federal fair housing laws and encroaches on the federal government's authority to oversee immigration.

Enforcement of the ordinance was barred pending the outcome of a trial on the lawsuit, which started in March. A federal judge is expected to rule later this year.



Doug Mohr, a member of Quakertown Alive!, the borough's downtown revitalization group, said the tenant list will be a good resource for residents who need to contact their renter neighbors about a problem — such as trash or where cars are parked — but can't track the renter or landlord down. Quakertown

Alive! favors rental inspections.

For about a year now council has discussed instituting rental inspections to protect buildings from degradation, increase safety and to better monitor criminal activity at so-called "trouble" properties.

Councilman Dave Wilsey, who lives next to rental units, said Monday the first draft of an ordinance authorizing inspections should be ready by the end of August. It might require inspections every two years, and could charge landlords a fee for them. However, inspections will probably not be required when the tenants change. Commercial rental properties could be inspected too.

The president of the Suburban Realtors Alliance cautioned council against making the inspections overly burdensome on landlords.

"Balance is really key. You don't want to penalize good landlords to the point where they say it's not worth it anymore and leave," said James Ridge, president/CEO of the alliance, which has 12,000 Realtors in four counties, including 4,000 in Bucks.

Ridge, who sounded concerns raised by some borough landlords, said some towns charge exorbitant inspection fees. They also have vague


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inspection requirements that are interpreted differently by different zoning officers, which can confuse landlords and drain their wallets.

Ridge said a reasonable inspection fee would be \$20 to \$25 and that the borough should provide an easy-to-read checklist on what must be done to pass an inspection.

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