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Activists demand privacy protections for DC One Card

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Privacy advocates have sounded the alarm about the District government's effort to issue a single, traceable identification card to residents, urging the D.C. Council to adopt legislation that protects the privacy of all users.

The DC One Card has been adopted by the Fenty administration as a single credential for use as a school and government employee ID, as a SmarTrip card for Metro, as a library card and as a recreational facility access card. It is designed to be used by any District government agency, though only a handful have signed on so far.

"People get very nervous when they're tracked from birth certificate to death by government agencies collecting information about them," Ward 3 Councilwoman Mary Cheh, chairwoman of the government operations committee, said at a public hearing.

Cheh scheduled the hearing after some of her constituents were told they could not gain access to the new Wilson Aquatic Center without one. The Department of Parks and Recreation uses the card as its main credential for admittance.

The One Card maximizes efficiency, saves money and increases convenience, said interim Chief Technology Officer Chris Willey. The card collects only seven pieces of data, like gender and contact information, he said, and it "tracks nothing."

The Office of the Chief Technology Officer is bound by a privacy policy that limits data collection to a minimum and bars the agency from tracking users, Willey said. But other government entities, he added, are not bound by OCTO's privacy policy -- in fact, an agency that uses the One Card is under no obligation to have a privacy policy at all.

And that might be the problem, Cheh said after Friday's hearing. OCTO has oversight of the One Card initiative by default because it created the technology, she said, but there is no office setting governmentwide standards.

"This ought to be something in the City Administrator's Office, managed correctly and monitored," Cheh said.


Privacy advocates urged better protections, strong enforceable rules and decentralized databases to prevent abuse. "Diverse and competitive identification" are inherently more secure and private than a single, unified system, said Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute.

"Whenever the government constructs a large centralized database the privacy interests of those who are in the database are implicated," said Steve Block, legislative counsel with the American Civil Liberties Union of the National Capital Area.

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