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Mexican man living in Urbana pleads guilty to voting, passport infractions

By Tom Kacich tkacich@news-gazette.com

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URBANA — A Mexican national who has lived in Urbana for 11 years pleaded guilty Thursday to five counts in a federal indictment, four of which are related to voting by an illegal alien.

The other count says that 33-year-old Miguel Valencia-Sandoval made a false statement in an application for a U.S. passport.

Tom Kacich

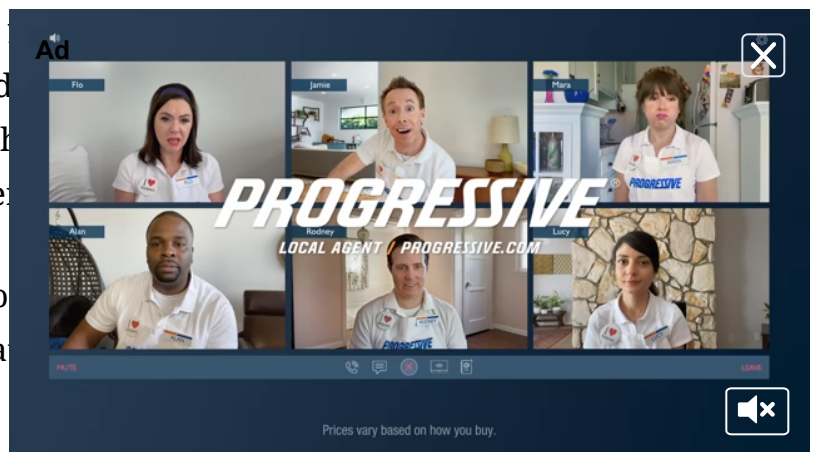
But two more serious counts of aggravated identity theft against Valencia-Sandoval will be dismissed at the time of sentencing under a plea agreement revealed Thursday between his attorney, Anthony Bruno, and the U.S. Attorney's Office, represented by Bryan Freres.

Those two counts both require prison sentences.

Valencia-Sandoval signed off on the agreement in an appearance before Magistrate Judge Eric Long.

He will be sentenced in January by U.S. District Judge Colin Bruce. Long said Thursday that the maximum possible sentence would be the defendant is eligible for a two-level reduction for acknowledging personal responsibility for his crime. If he is sentenced in January, he will have served a year in federal prison.

Valencia-Sandoval also faces possible deportation that is a separate judicial proceeding initiated by Immigration Enforcement.



Valencia-Sandoval has admitted that he paid \$50,000 in March 2005 for the birth certificate of a Texas man, Ramiro Guerrero-Vasquez, and that he used it in 2012 to obtain a passport in Champaign.

Through records checks, ICE agents also determined that he registered to vote in Champaign County in October 2008, falsely swearing that he was Ramiro Vasquez, and that he had voted in elections in 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016.

Authorities first were tipped off to Valencia-Sandoval's real identity in August 2016 when an informant went to the Piatt County Sheriff's Office.

Valencia-Sandoval most recently has worked for an Urbana drywall contractor. He has a wife and four young children who still live in Urbana. All four children were born in the United States.

He was arrested at the U.S.-Mexico border in Laredo, Texas, last January when he attempted to re-enter the country with the Texas birth certificate.

Federal authorities cautioned that Valencia-Sandoval's prosecution was not related to President Donald Trump's assertion that millions of people had voted illegally in the November 2016 election.

"Don't read any more into it than this," said Sharon Paul, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Springfield. "Someone brought the information about him to us. What are you going to do?"

But Bruno, Valencia-Sandoval's attorney, noted that Trump had made illegal voting an issue.

"It's important to remember that they captured him at the border January 7th. Thirteen days later, Donald Trump is inaugurated in Washington on a platform of cracking down on illegal immigration since November that 3 million votes were in question upon this case, and it's this lawyer's belief that the federal elections, that became one of the driving forces behind Security or the Justice Department."

Bruno said he believed the FBI investigation of Valencia-Sandoval gave prosecutors no choice but to file the voting-related charges.

"I know two things. I know that he was under criminal investigation, and he was in custody before they ever found (he had voted illegally). And I also know that they're the least serious of all the offenses he was charged with. And so I think Miguel Valencia-Sandoval was going to be prosecuted for passport fraud well before they ever found out he voted illegally.

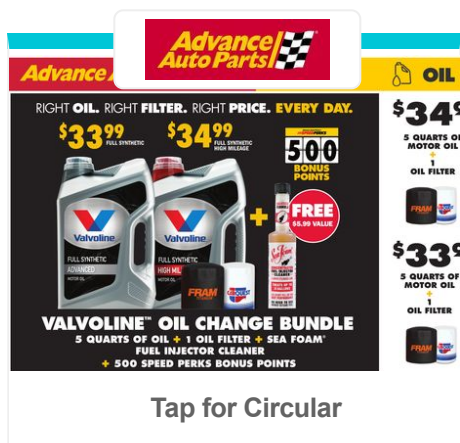
"Once they found that out, I don't think they had much discretion about not charging him. It was part of the FBI's initial investigation to contact (Champaign County Clerk) Gordy Hulten, and once they did that, the FBI provided the U.S. Attorney's Office with documentation that appeared to show him voting in federal elections. I think that's when the prosecutor at this level says, 'Well, what am I to do? I'm going to have to charge him.'"

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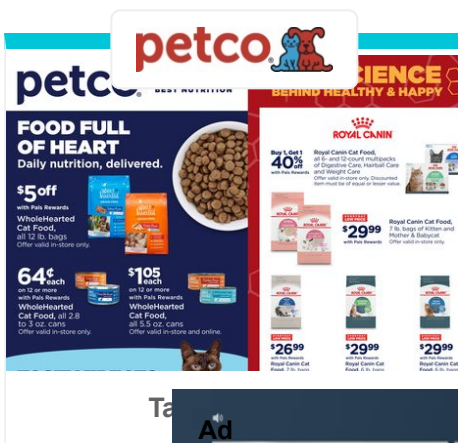
Columnist

Tom Kacich is a columnist and the author of Tom's Mailbag at The News-Gazette. His column appears Sundays. His email is tkacich@news-gazette.com, and you can follow him on Twitter (@tkacich).

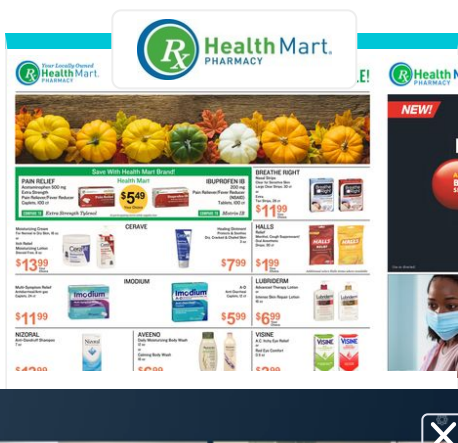
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