

Op Ed Piece

On August 13, 2009, the City of Turlock received written correspondence from the Freedom from Religion Foundation urging the City Council to discontinue the practice of scheduling an invocation before Turlock City Council meetings.

The letter indicates that “prayers are unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Calling upon Council members and citizens to rise and pray (even silently) is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of secular city government . . .”

It is my belief that legislative prayer is a cherished and lawful American tradition. In fact, the opening of sessions of legislative and other deliberative public bodies with prayer is deeply embedded in the history and tradition of this country. From colonial times through the founding of the Republic and ever since, the practice of legislative prayer has coexisted with the principles of disestablishment and religious freedom.

There are cherished government practices embracing religion, including Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, congressional and military chaplains and the congressional prayer room, the Pledge of Allegiance, and presidential proclamations for a National Day of Prayer. These government acknowledgements of religion serve the legitimate secular purpose of solemnizing public occasions, expressing confidence in the future, and encouraging the recognition of what is worthy of appreciation of society and are not understood as conveying government approval of particular religious beliefs.

We will be working with our City Attorney and other constitutional law scholars to develop a policy that honors our traditions while complying with the Constitution. However, I intend to defend our right to participate in the cherished and lawful American tradition of legislative prayer.

Respectfully submitted by,
Turlock City Council Member Kurt Spycher