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Prayer gets turned down in Albany

Albany Common Council votes but rejects call for prayer to open meetings

By **JORDAN CARLEO-EVANGELIST**, Staff writer
 First published in print: Tuesday, April 20, 2010

ALBANY -- City lawmakers voted decisively Monday night not to bring prayer to their bi-weekly meetings -- but not as decisively as it once seemed.



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Councilman Anton Konev managed to win one vote -- other than his own -- for his controversial proposal to replace the existing moment of silence that follows the Pledge of Allegiance with a prayer.

South End Councilman Lester Freeman, who had so far been uncommitted, supported Konev's resolution, even while acknowledging that there are much more important issues for the council to be working on.

"This is not a publicity stunt. This is what he feels," Freeman said of Konev, a fellow first-term lawmaker.

Freeman, who represents the 2nd Ward, said he arrived at his position only after praying with Konev and said his decision didn't come lightly.

Among other things, Freeman cited the strong faith community in the neighborhoods he represents.

"I feel strongly that it's private," Freeman said of his own faith, "but, hey, it's no harm, no foul -- it doesn't hurt anyone."

Still, Konev's resolution was soundly defeated by the all-Democrat council in a 2-12-1 vote, with 5th Ward Councilwoman Jackie Jenkins-Cox voting 'present.'

Jenkins-Cox, who represents West Hill, said she didn't vote yes because she also strongly believes her own faith is private but wanted to be supportive of her colleague's proposal.

"That's his passion," she said of Konev. "I like to keep my prayer between me and God."

Until Monday night, no council member other than Konev had publicly supported his proposal, which called for as many of the faiths in the city to be represented on a rotating basis as a way to showcase Albany's diversity.

"It is my strong belief that this is really something that this city council desperately needs," said Konev, who represents the midtown 11th Ward.

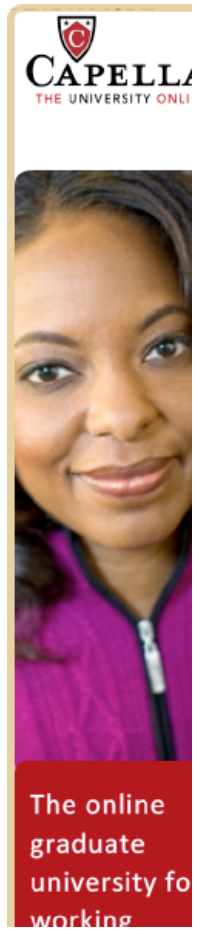
Konev's assessment, however, rankled colleague Dominick Calsolaro.

"I don't think anybody has any right to tell someone else that they need prayer," Calsolaro replied.

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Councilman John Rosenzweig, who represents the 8th Ward, agreed, saying his colleagues' time would be better spent on trying to get the city reimbursed for tax-exempt state land and other pressing issues.

"What this council needs is PILOT monies for the Harriman Campus. What this council needs is ways to increase our economy," Rosenzweig said. "I think the last responsibility that we have in this chamber is to dictate prayer of any sort."

The existing moment of silence is the result of a decade-old compromise reached after the council last debated bringing prayer to its meetings.

"This is a compromise that has worked," said 14th Ward Councilman Joseph Igoe, a supporter of that 1999 prayer proposal.

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