

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 10, 2019

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:
mayorjakespano@gmail.com

The Honorable Jake Spano
Mayor
St. Louis Park
5005 Minnetonka Blvd.
St. Louis Park, MN 55416

Re: Support for decision to skip Pledge

Dear Mayor Spano and City Council members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to thank the City Council for its decision to omit a formal Pledge of Allegiance recitation from its meetings and to urge you not to reverse that decision. FFRF is a national nonprofit with more than 31,000 members nationwide, including two state chapters and more than 650 members in Minnesota. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional separation between church and state, and to educate the public about matters related to nontheism.

We applaud the City Council's commitment to respecting your community's diversity and the unanimous June 17 decision to skip a formal recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. We urge you to stand by the decision despite the recent pressure to reverse course. The City Council could use the opportunity to educate some community members who falsely equate the Pledge with patriotism.

In particular, we applaud Council Member Rachel Harris for explaining, rightly, that a formal pledge with the words "under God" violates the constitutional principle of keeping state and church separate. It is ironic that protesters in the audience—purportedly standing up for American patriotism—jeered and booed the cite to the U.S. Constitution. This irony is lost on them, of course, but it emphasizes the hollowness of their false patriotism. True patriotism is defending American ideals, including the First Amendment's guarantee of a secular government, not worshipping a flag or chanting "USA!".

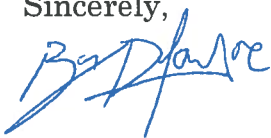
Those protestors may be surprised to learn that the Pledge's author, Francis Bellamy, was a socialist. He was also a Baptist minister, but the original 1892 version of the Pledge did not include any religious language. The Pledge was codified into law 50 years later, in 1942, but the religious phrase "under God" was not inserted into the Pledge until 1954, as a product of the McCarthy-era "red scare," along with the subsequent declaration of "In God We Trust" as the national motto to replace "E Pluribus Unum" [out of many, one] and the placement of that phrase on paper currency. Collectively these measures are a curious development for a country founded on secularism. The false patriots who are upset about omitting the Pledge need to be reminded that their elected officials swore to uphold the U.S. Constitution, not to perpetuate fundamentally un-American traditions from the 1950s.

Aside from concerns regarding the constitutional separation between state and church, many Americans object to the Pledge's promise of "liberty and justice for all," for a variety of reasons. It is wrong to force those Americans committed to making the country more just to either participate in a Pledge that they do not believe their government is living up to, or to openly protest the Pledge and invite ironic accusations of being unpatriotic.

Finally, there are many members of your community who are not American citizens, and they should likewise not be forced to choose between pledging allegiance to a country's flag that is not their own or openly not participating, which would be wrongly seen as a show of hostility. Foreign exchange students, for example, are members of your community who should feel comfortable participating in local government without facing a loyalty test.

Thank you again for courageously standing up for American values rather than giving in to the pressure of faux patriotism. We urge you to remain steadfast in this decision and to show protestors that you will fight to defend what you swore to uphold—the U.S. Constitution—even when told to do otherwise by a crowd waving and wearing the American flag.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ryan D. Jayne".

Ryan D. Jayne
Staff Attorney

cc: City Council members, via email