

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: dayoung@orem.org, jlambson@orem.org,
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The Honorable David Young
Mayor
City of Orem
56 N State St.
Orem, UT 84057

Re: “In God We Trust”

Dear Mayor Young and City Council members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern with the City adopting “In God We Trust” as its official motto. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Utah. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that the City recently adopted “In God We Trust” as its official motto. We understand the Council voted unanimously to adopt the motto because it is “a representation of the community's values and heritage.”¹ Mayor Young described the motto as “a reflection of our collective faith, our commitment to one another, and our trust in the foundational principles that guide us.”² We understand the phrase will be incorporated into the official city seal and will be displayed in prominent locations throughout Orem, including city buildings, parks, and the Orem Public Library.

We also understand that Mayor Young has attempted to downplay the divisive message that the adoption of this religious motto sends to the community:³

While 'In God We Trust' has religious connotations, our intention is to signify trust in the broader sense—trust in the greater good, in the strong bonds of our community, and in the ideals that unite us. Orem is a place where all people, regardless of belief or background, are valued and respected.

¹<https://wgntv.com/business/press-releases/ein-presswire/672893045/the-city-of-orem-adopts-in-god-we-trust-as-its-official-motto/>

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

Mayor Young has inappropriately described the City’s values as “God, Family, and Country.”⁴ In his October 2023 “Mayor’s Message,” he talked about the “core value of God,” and highlighted the religious purpose for the adoption of “In God We Trust” as the official City motto:⁵

The acknowledgement of the divine in our city proceedings can only ennoble and strengthen our efforts to make Orem the best place in America to raise a family. This motto can serve as a constant reminder that we are a community that sets high goals and is guided by a higher purpose...

We write to request that the City reverse its decision to make “In God We Trust” the official City motto and cease using city resources to promote religion in order to respect the diverse views of the residents of Orem. “In God We Trust” is not a “reflection of [Orem’s] collective faith.” Orem, like all cities in the United States, has a diverse population that includes atheists and members of minority religions that don’t believe in a monotheistic god or any gods who are not shown “value and respect” by the decision to adopt this motto. No city shares one “collective faith.”

It is inappropriate for the City to adopt a religious motto and to display “In God We Trust” on government property. Statements about a god have no place on city-owned property. Public officials should not use their government position and government property to promote religious belief. The City serves all residents of Orem, not just those who believe in a God or a “higher purpose.”

The Supreme Court has long held that the Establishment Clause requires “government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty., Ky. v. ACLU of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). The adoption of “In God We Trust” as the official City motto, and its display on city property conveys a message to nonreligious citizens that they are not welcome or accepted in Orem.

Citizens interact with and rely on City officials during some of the most urgent times of their lives. These citizens should not be made to feel offended, excluded, and like political outsiders because the local government they support with their taxes oversteps its power by affiliating itself with religion and prominently displaying a religious statement on city property. We hope you’ll agree that the City of Orem must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, and hostility toward others.

The history of the motto “In God We Trust” evidences no secular purpose; on the contrary, the motto was first adopted during the Cold War as a reaction to the purported “godlessness” of Communism. America’s original motto was purely secular—“*E Pluribus Unum*” (“out of many, one”)—and was selected by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin.

⁴ <https://orem.org/mayors-message-november-2023/>

⁵ *Id.*

Overall, nearly 30 percent of Americans today are nonreligious.⁶ “In God We Trust” is thus not even accurate—for it to be accurate, it would have to read, “In God Some of Us Trust.”

In recognition of the City’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral towards religion, and out of respect for the diversity and First Amendment rights of Orem’s residents, we ask that the City reverse its decision to adopt “In God We Trust” as the official City motto. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

⁶ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.