

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

July 7, 2011

SENT VIA ELECTRONIC AND U.S. MAIL

The Honorable Larry McCallon
City Hall
27215 Base Line
Highland, CA 92346

Re: Opening City Council Meetings with Prayer

Dear Mayor McCallon:

Our national organization, which works to keep state and church separate, has been contacted by taxpayers and residents of Highland who strenuously oppose prayer to begin City Council meetings. It is our information and understanding that the Highland City Council ("Council") includes prayers as part of its meetings. On behalf of our Highland membership, we ask that you discontinue the practice of prayer during Council meetings.

Government prayer is 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. Council members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on taxpayers' time. The city ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion, amounting to a governmental endorsement that excludes the 15% of your population that is nonreligious (Religious Identification Survey 2008). The Council compounds the violation when a majority of prayers are sectarian, i.e. to Jesus, or a majority of the officiants are of one religion, i.e., Christian or Christian clergy (which inevitably happens). Such prayer creates acrimony, makes minorities feel like political outsiders in their own community, and shows unconstitutional governmental preference not just for religion over nonreligion, but Christianity over other faiths.

Citizens of all religions or no religion are compelled to come before you on civic, secular matters: variances, sewers, building permits, restaurant licenses, sidewalk repair, etc. They should not be subjected to a religious show or test, or be expected to demonstrate religious obeisance at a city function. We fail to see why divine guidance is needed over such earthly matters anyway.

Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning as hypocrisy public prayer. "Enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret." (Matthew 6:5-13). Observing a strict separation of church and state offends nobody, and honors not only the

First Amendment, but also the very tenets being professed during City prayers.

On behalf of our Highland membership and our secular Constitution, we urge the City Council to concentrate on city matters. The tone that should be set is one that respects and reveres the secular and entirely godless U.S. Constitution, which City officials take an oath to uphold, and whose only references to religion are exclusionary.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President