

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

November 23, 2011

SENT VIA MAIL & EMAIL
(dnerad@madison.k12.wi.us)

Daniel Nerad
Superintendent
Madison Metropolitan School District
545 W Dayton St
Madison WI 53703

RE: Madison Prep Academy and Church Subsidy

Dear Superintendent Nerad:

I am writing on behalf of concerned Madison residents and taxpayers, and other Wisconsin members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to concerns with the proposed Madison Preparatory Academy. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 1,350 Wisconsin members, and hundreds in the Madison Metropolitan School District. We work to represent the views of nonbelievers and protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church. We are deeply troubled by proposed public expenditures related to the use of Mount Olive Lutheran Church.

We understand the District is reviewing plans for the Madison Prep Academy released on Oct. 30, which indicate the school has signed a letter of intent with Mount Olive Lutheran Church for use of the church building at 4018 Mineral Point Road. Representatives for the school have said that the plans include spending more than one million dollars on improvements to the church property in addition to monthly rent. The school has not offered any details publicly on how the \$1 million would be spent. The school's financial plans state that rent would be \$12,600 per month for the first year and nearly \$24,000 per month for the second and third years. The charter school lease would be for 3 years and thereafter the school "intends to move one or both of its schools into one or more permanent facilities that can appropriately handle the school's growth to 820 students."

Under this proposal, a church would receive a windfall. Public funding would be used to finance permanent improvements to the church. Simply put, public funds should not be used to renovate churches. The property is listed for sale for \$1,450,000. By the end of 3 years, the church would receive upwards of \$725,000 in rent in addition to the benefit of \$1,000,000 in improvements, no strings attached, with no further use or benefit to the taxpayers. When the agreement ends, Madison Prep will be homeless, and Mount Olive

will have been enriched by \$1,750,000 in taxpayer funds! This is not financially sound, and also amounts to an unlawful public subsidy of a ministry and a place of worship:

...[N]or shall any person be compelled to attend, erect or support any place of worship, or to maintain any ministry, without consent; nor shall any control of, or interference with, the rights of conscience be permitted, or any preference be given by law to any religious establishments or modes of worship; nor shall any money be drawn from the treasury for the benefit of religious societies, or religious or theological seminaries. (Wisconsin Const. Art. I, Section. 18)

We are hearing from many Madison residents who oppose the merger of public education and religious institutions, such as the expansion of school vouchers, 4K church locations, and charter school church locations. Supporters of these changes say they are justified as they offer cost savings. The principle of keeping public education public is far more important than short-term cost savings, but in this case, the MMSD proposal would waste — not save — public funds. It is fiscal folly, and unacceptable.

While the arrangements with Mount Olive Church might be mutually agreeable to the church and Madison Prep, they are not agreeable to Wisconsin taxpayers. As a school that receives public funding, Madison Prep needs to find an appropriate alternative or should outright purchase the church property. Entering into a sweetheart deal with the church is not the solution.

Our community is made up of persons of various beliefs and denominations, as well as nonbelief. Some community members do not wish to support a church, no matter that the improvements will also temporarily benefit the school. You can imagine the outcry from the public if the money were going to facilities connected to a Muslim mosque. Likewise, many members of the community do not wish to give public money to a church.

The arrangement is especially concerning because it is our information and understanding that Mount Olive hasn't upheld its duty to support Madison schools. The building reportedly has been vacant since 2009, yet City records show that no taxes have been paid during that time. Why should the District approve of a sweetheart deal with the church when the church hasn't even contributed one cent to support District schools? We have requested an investigation by the Madison City Assessor into the church's apparent abuse of its tax-exempt status.

We understand the difficulties that Madison Prep must undergo in finding a suitable school location. But we ask that Madison Prep not take shortcuts by cutting a check to the church in order to get the school up and running as quickly as possible, which will end up costing taxpayers far more than if they actually purchased the building. Housing a public school in a church is wrong and subsidizing permanent improvements to the church cannot happen on the taxpayer's dime.

On behalf of local complainants and our Madison membership, we respectfully urge you to reject the school's plan to rent from Mount Olive Lutheran Church. Do not use public

school financing to subsidize religion. Where public funding goes, public accountability must follow.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor

Cc: Madison Board of Education
board@madison.k12.wi.us