

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 8, 2025

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: mayor@ci.salinas.ca.us; district1@ci.salinas.ca.us;
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The Honorable Dennis Donohue
Mayor
200 Lincoln Ave.
Salinas, CA 93901

Salinas City Council
200 Lincoln Ave.
Salinas, CA 93901

Re: Concerns regarding funding for religious activities

Dear Mayor Donohue and Council Members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding constitutional concerns over the Salinas City Council possibly awarding a church \$100,000 in grant funds. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 42,000 members across the country, including more than 5,300 members and several chapters in California. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We've received a report that the Council is considering retroactively awarding Compass Church \$100,000 for a Fourth of July Firework event that included preaching and proselytizing. Per a local news source:

The money is part of the city's community sponsorship program, which awards organizations that have an event with a public and economic benefit to the community with sponsorship money.

Compass Church applied for the money for their Fourth of July Firework Extravaganza.¹

The money would come from a "community scholarship" program, and the entire budget for the program is \$150,000. According to reporting, a single organization is not supposed to receive more than \$50,000, but a Council member proposed making a special exception and awarding Compass Church double the maximum.² The reasoning behind this proposed exception is unclear.

Apparently the program's eligibility criteria "state the city will not award sponsorship to any church organization to promote religious purposes."³ A community member quoted in the article explained that the church's 2025 Firework Extravaganza included Pastor [REDACTED] giving a sermon for 10 to 15 minutes.⁴ It does not seem that the Council has provided thorough reasoning behind why the church's fireworks show, which included a religious service, did not "promote religious purposes" or why the church's fireworks show is so important to the community that the Council is justified in awarding the church two thirds of the entire budget and making a special exception to the award cap.

¹ Zoe Hunt, *Salinas postpones vote on \$100k Compass Church fireworks sponsorship*, CNN Newsource (Aug. 13, 2025, 10:49 AM), <https://bit.ly/3Jzafea>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

We write to request that the Council refrain from using taxpayer money to retroactively fund Compass Church's religious fireworks show in violation of the separation of state and church as well as the grant program's policies.

The government cannot subsidize certain religions or dispense special financial benefits to religious organizations or ministries. The First Amendment's Establishment Clause requires government neutrality between religions, and between religion and nonreligion. As the Supreme Court recently affirmed, "the First Amendment mandates government neutrality between religions" *Cath. Charities Bureau, Inc. v. Wis. Lab. & Indus. Rev. Comm'n*, 605 U.S. 238, 241 (2025); *See also*, *McCreary Cnty v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985). The First Amendment prohibits "sponsorship, financial support, and active involvement of the sovereign in religious activity." *Walz v. NY Tax Comm'n*, 397 U.S. 664, 668 (1970) (emphasis added); *see also* *Mitchell v. Helms*, 530 U.S. 793, 819 (2000); *Bowen v. Kendrick*, 487 U.S. 589, 621 (1988); *Roemer v. Bd. of Pub. Works*, 426 U.S. 736, 754–55 (1976). This means that the Council may not dispense public money to reimburse a church for an event that included preaching and proselytizing. *See, e.g., Levitt v. Comm. for Pub. Educ. & Religious Liberty*, 412 U.S. 472, 480 (1973) ("[T]he State is constitutionally compelled to assure that the state-supported activity is not being used for religious indoctrination.").

Finally, the Council's proposal to retroactively award Compass Church \$100,000 for a religious fireworks show is needlessly divisive and betrays taxpayer trust. The Council's proposed actions marginalize all community members who are among the nearly 30 percent of adult Americans who are religiously unaffiliated, as well as the additional six percent of Americans adhering to non-Christian faiths.⁵ The City of Salinas should devote public funds to endeavors that are inclusive and welcoming to the entire community, not just community members who adhere to a particular faith.

Out of respect for the First Amendment and the community's diversity, we ask that Salinas City Council refrain from awarding Compass Church \$100,000 in taxpayer funds as reimbursement for its religious event. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Samantha" and last name "Lawrence" clearly legible.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

⁵ Gregory A. Smith, *Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe*, Pew Research Center, Jan. 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.