FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: ttucker@cityofbartow.net, lsimpson@cityofbartow.net, tpfeiffer@cityofbartow.net, gball@cityofbartow.net, llongworth@cityofbartow.net**

The Honorable Tanya Tucker
Mayor
Bartow City Commission
450 N. Wilson Ave.
Bartow, FL 33830

**Re: Disruption of Muslim invocation and request to discontinue official prayers**

Dear Mayor Tucker and City Commission members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to express serious concerns regarding the hostile disruption of a Muslim invocation at the Commission's November 16, 2026, meeting and to urge the Commission to discontinue its divisive practice of opening government meetings with prayers. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,900 members in Florida and a chapter, the Central Florida Freethought Community. 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 on November 16, Imam Sajid R. Bhuiya of Masjid Al Nur Mosque was invited to deliver the opening invocation at the Commission's regular meeting. As Imam Bhuiya approached the podium, members of the audience began loudly reciting the Lord's Prayer in an apparent attempt to drown out his invocation. When the crowd briefly quieted and he attempted to begin, protesters again interrupted him with Christian prayers and shouting. One attendee reportedly yelled, "Go back where you came from." The disruption continued for approximately 10 minutes before Imam Bhuiya was finally able to deliver his invocation.

The contrast between the protesters' conduct and Imam Bhuiya's actual message could hardly have been more striking. While some attendees shouted over him and demanded that he leave, Imam Bhuiya called for mutual respect and understanding, reminding those present that "our differences in background, culture, and faith should not prevent us from treating one another with dignity, respect, and kindness."[1]

We understand that Commissioner Trish Pfeiffer reported that commissioners had received 214 emails concerning the invitation by 5:16 p.m. on the day of the meeting.[2] More than an hour of public comment reportedly focused on the imam's participation, with residents expressing sharply divided views about religious inclusion and the appropriateness of invocations at government meetings. What

[1] https://bit.ly/4iSbsMQ.
[2] https://bit.ly/4t4cgl6.

should have been an ordinary meeting devoted to the business of governing instead became consumed by religious controversy.

The conduct of those who attempted to silence Imam Bhuiya was disgraceful. The First Amendment guarantees religious freedom to Muslims just as surely as it does to Christians. No resident has the right to disrupt official government proceedings simply because another person's religious beliefs differ from their own. The protesters' attempt to drown out a Muslim invocation with Christian prayer demonstrated precisely the religious intolerance that our constitutional commitment to religious liberty is intended to prevent.

We appreciate that Commission members attempted to restore order. We also commend Commissioner Pfeiffer for recognizing the Commission's obligation to represent all residents, regardless of their religious beliefs. As she appropriately explained during the meeting:

> We govern a city of people, not a congregation of faith. As elected officials, we have a responsibility to uphold those principles, even when doing so may be unpopular. We do not have to share someone's faith to respect their right to practice it.

We agree wholeheartedly. Government officials represent all residents, not merely those who share the religious beliefs of the majority. City Attorney Sean Parker likewise correctly recognized that if the Commission has invocations, it cannot limit its invocation practice to Christian speakers. According to local reporting,[3] Parker explained that the invitation arose after a local Hindu temple requested an opportunity to deliver an invocation, prompting him to suggest reaching out to Bartow's mosque. Parker acknowledged that the Commission has traditionally invited Christian ministers and pastors but recognized that representatives of other faiths should also be welcome.

Parker reportedly explained, "This is a government meeting, not a religious forum."

We agree, and that is precisely why the Commission should discontinue its invocation practice entirely. Government meetings should be devoted to the public's business, not religious exercises that invite division and conflict. By incorporating prayer into its official proceedings, the Commission has unnecessarily made religion a focal point of civic participation. The events of November 16 demonstrate the consequences: Instead of bringing residents together, the invocation sparked religious hostility, disrupted government business, and consumed more than an hour of public discussion.

The Supreme Court addressed legislative prayer in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 572 U.S. 565 (2014). The Court identified several important elements in the town's invocation practice that, taken together, ensured that the practice did not impermissibly advance one religion over others. The town of Greece "at no point excluded or denied an opportunity to a would-be prayer giver." *Id.* at 571. The Court emphasized that legislative prayer must not be administered in a manner that discriminates against minority religious perspectives, noting that government bodies must maintain "a policy of nondiscrimination" and refrain from acting with "aversion or bias . . . against minority faiths." *Id.* at 585.

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[3] *Id*.

The Court also explained that legislative invocations should reflect an inclusive civic purpose: "These ceremonial prayers strive for the idea that people of many faiths may be united in a community of tolerance and devotion." *Id.* at 584.

What occurred in Bartow was the opposite of tolerance and unity. Rather than bringing the community together, the invocation became an occasion for residents to shout down a religious minority, disrupt public business, and turn a government meeting into a confrontation over religious identity.

This incident illustrates precisely why FFRF has long urged government bodies to eliminate official invocations altogether. Prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Commissioners are free to pray privately or worship on their own time, in their own way. They do not need to conduct religious exercises as part of official government proceedings.

Citizens attend Commission meetings to participate in decisions affecting their livelihoods, property, families, and community. They should not have to sit through religious exercises, witness competing religious groups attempting to assert dominance over one another, or feel like outsiders in their own city because they do not share the religious beliefs of other residents.

The Commission represents Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, atheists, agnostics, and residents of countless other religious and nonreligious perspectives. None of these residents should have to wonder whether their government considers their beliefs less legitimate or less welcome than those of the religious majority. The most effective way to ensure that everyone feels equally represented is for the Commission to remain neutral on matters of religion and focus its official proceedings on the secular business of governing.

The Commission's experience should also serve as a reminder that religious neutrality does not require government officials to provide a platform for every religion. It requires government officials to refrain from favoring one religion over another or religion over nonreligion. The Commission can fully respect the religious freedom of every Bartow resident without incorporating religious exercises into its official meetings.

The best solution is simple: end the invocation practice entirely. The Commission can begin its meetings with a secular moment of reflection or a statement celebrating shared civic responsibilities, or simply proceed directly to the business of governing. None of these alternatives would privilege religion over nonreligion or invite the kind of religious confrontation that disrupted the November 16 meeting.

If the Commission nevertheless insists on continuing its invocation practice, it must ensure that all eligible speakers are treated equally, regardless of their religious beliefs, and that no speaker is subjected to harassment or disruption because of their faith. The Commission must also make clear that its meetings are not an appropriate forum for competing religious groups to attempt to silence or counteract one another's prayers.

Ultimately, the Commission should ask itself what purpose these invocations serve. If the goal is to bring residents together around shared civic responsibilities, the events of November 16 demonstrate that official prayer is poorly suited to that task. A government meeting should be a place where

residents come together as equal citizens, not where they are divided according to religious affiliation.

Commissioner Pfeiffer was exactly right when she observed that the Commission governs “a city of people, not a congregation of faith.” We urge the Commission to take that principle to its logical conclusion. The most meaningful response to this unfortunate incident would be to end official invocations and ensure that future meetings are devoted to serving the entire community, without regard to religious belief or nonbelief.

Please inform us in writing of the steps the Commission intends to take to address these concerns and whether it will discontinue its invocation practice. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
*Legal Counsel*
*Freedom From Religion Foundation*