



Chris Pietsch/The Register-Guard

A banner in Eugene encourages church attendance for Christmas. An atheist is demanding that city officials remove the banner that he believes is a violation of church and state.

Atheist seeks removal of Christmas banner

Associated Press

EUGENE — A man has threatened to sue city officials in Eugene because of a Christmas banner that he believes is a violation of the separation of church and state.

The banner that stretches above a downtown street advises people to attend church this Christmas and celebrate Jesus Christ.

Rene Salm, a published atheist who lives in Eugene, told The Register-Guard that he has contacted the American Civil Liberties Union and is trying to find a lawyer.

"I feel like I'm being

assaulted, telling me to go to church and celebrate Jesus," said Salm, who has published books titled "NazarethGate" and "The Myth of Nazareth."

Other residents have raised similar complaints, the newspaper reports.

The city allows community groups and nonprofit organizations to install banners for up to three weeks to promote events. The city has designated three spots for street banners.

The group or organization must submit a completed application and pay a \$37.45 fee. It is responsible for installing and removing the banner.

Virgil Adams applied in July to hang the Christmas banner between Dec. 12 and Jan. 1, according to a copy of the application.

"He can go and get a permit and do what he wants," Adams said of Salm. "It's a free country."

It's the second year in a row that a Christmas banner has led to complaints in the city that's home to the University of Oregon.

Councilor Betty Taylor raised the issue in February, noting at a council meeting that the banner displayed in December 2016 caused a stir.

Kathryn Brotherton, now

Eugene's acting city attorney, responded that the city can't regulate the content of any banner if it makes the space available to the public, so long as the applicant complies with the program's rules.

"A banner advertising an Easter service and a banner advertising a picnic at Alton Baker (Park) have the same ability to buy that spot and be posted there," she said, according to a video of the meeting available online.

Taylor then asked if the city would permit a banner for an event in support of the Ku Klux Klan.

Brotherton answered "yes."



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