

On California coast, atheists nudge out Nativity scenes - CNN.com

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A creche stands in Santa Monica, California, where atheists have legally occupied space normally used for Nativity scenes.

Los Angeles (CNN) -- Every Christmas for the past 60 years, Nativity scenes have dominated two blocks of a park on bluffs overlooking the ocean in Santa Monica, California.

The 14 scenes depicting Jesus Christ's birth have long been a popular attraction among area residents and tourists to the southern California city.

This year, however, atheists have taken over most of the two-block stretch, nearly shutting out and angering a group of churches who contend the atheists have organized against the Christians and gamed a city lottery process allocating the holiday exhibit space.

In response, a leader of the atheist group says he's just looking for evenhanded treatment to present his beliefs in a public space -- and goes so far as to say that the city shouldn't even be allowing any religious or even atheist expression in the park.

That's why he and his group have put nothing on half of the park exhibit spaces that they've secured from the city this year.

The atheists are declaring the politically left-leaning seaside town of Santa Monica as their latest battleground in a national movement to assert their rights.

"I'm part of a growing movement in America of atheists standing up for their rights. It's a very exciting time for us that

we're having more of an impact in our society," said Damon Vix, the organizer of the atheist group.

"I'm a civil rights activist, and atheists have been discriminated against for as long as I've been an atheist -- since high school," added Vix, 43, a freelance prop maker who lives in Burbank, California.

But Hunter Jameson, the Nativity scene committee chairman representing 14 Santa Monica groups that are mostly churches, said the church members are now planning to petition the city in 2012 to change the process so that creches would be better represented on the park bluffs adjacent to downtown Santa Monica.

"There's a very militant atheist movement that's trying to drive out vestiges of the truth. They're trying to deny the truth that this nation is founded on Christian principles," Jameson said.

"These people, atheists, a number of them, like Mr. Vix, are bound and determined to drive away from any public place any manifestation that Americans are God-loving people," Jameson added. "This is not fair, this is not just."

The atheists group won from the city 18 of the 21 exhibit spaces -- leaving only two plots to the Christian churches and one to a rabbi erecting a Menorah scene. The venue is Palisades Park, with vistas of the Santa Monica Pier and, in the distance, the coastal mountains of Malibu.

"We don't object to them being there. We just object to them manipulating the rules, to try to deprive us of our freedom of speech," Jameson said. "You add everything together, there would be enough room in the two blocks to take care of all the displays. It's a matter of portioning the space fairly, and we are undertaking a petition drive."

Caught in the middle of the dispute are city officials, who say the lottery process is governed under federal law, and there's nothing they can do about this year's results.

What enabled the atheists to garner the vast majority of the park's exhibit space is they loaded up the applicant pool by constituting 11 of the 13 applications, according to the atheist group. The other applicants were for the Menorah scene and the Nativity scene.

Vix and 10 Los Angeles area friends he recruited make up the 11-member alliance, though three of them aren't atheist but agreed to join because they don't agree with the city's policy of supporting religious displays, Vix said.

When names were drawn, one of the atheists' names came up first, and he claimed a maximum nine exhibit spaces, followed by the rabbi who asked for one, and then another atheist who secured nine more, city officials said.

When Jameson's name came, only two spaces were left, and he took both of them, city officials said.

"The first thing to make clear is that the whole process is governed by federal law that has designated public parks as public forums. In these public forums, individuals have maximum protection," said Barbara Stinchfield, Santa Monica's director of community and cultural services.

"In the past we've been able to accommodate everyone who has applied. This year, instead of the three requests, we've had (13) requests, whose total request for spaces exceeded the spaces we've had. So we had to develop a system to allocate the space that wasn't governed by the content of the display because the First Amendment protects them," she said.

"We literally pulled names out of a basket and started assigning spaces until all the spaces were allocated," Stinchfield said.

The church groups are using their two spots to display three creches.

"We didn't evaluate the content of displays in making the decision of who got the spaces," Stinchfield said.

Jameson, the Nativity scene committee chairman, said the church groups are upset that the atheists don't live in Santa

Monica, though Vix said he has worked there and that he and his friends visit and shop there. Jameson doesn't live in Santa Monica either, but he attends church there, he said.

"The gist of it is that out-of-town atheists are attempting to hijack the nearly 60-year-old Santa Monica Nativity scenes Christmas celebration," Jameson said.

"There is not a whole lot we can really do about it" this year, Jameson added. "We're not trying to get rid of anybody. If we had all our displays up there, they would take a block, and one block would be left over. We just think that a local display deserves some preference in a local park. We're not saying ban them (the atheists). We're just saying there should be preference given to our local and historic display - the Nativity scenes."

Dix, who consulted with the American Atheists and the Freedom from Religion Foundation in preparing his group's applications, has left nine of the 18 exhibit spaces blank, he said.

On the remaining parcels, Dix and his friends have installed 18-inch-by-24-inch signs that include quotes from the Founding Fathers and U.S. Supreme Court rulings on the separation of church and state, he said.

One sign was caged within a chain link fence -- for protection from vandals, Dix says -- it states: "Religions are all alike -- founded upon fables and mythologies."

The sign attributes the quote to Thomas Jefferson, but Dix said he couldn't verify whether Jefferson actually made that statement.

Stated Dix: "I know it's close to what he believed, and it's probably taken a little bit out of context at most."

Another display features a Freedom from Religion Foundation banner that begins: "At this season of the winter solstice, let reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world," according to Dix.

That banner is the second one installed this month; the first one was vandalized, Dix said.