



**Milwaukee
Jewish
Council**

Helpaer Community Services Building
1360 North Prospect Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202
Phone 414-276-7920

TESTIMONY

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to present this testimony today. My name is Nancy Weisenberg and I am here on behalf of the Milwaukee Jewish Council, a constituent organization representing the 24 Milwaukee area synagogues and agencies listed on the back of this sheet. I am here to register our opposition to the request that a Menorah be placed on County-owned land at the foot of Wisconsin Avenue.

The menorah is a religious symbol used in commemoration of a Jewish religious holiday, Hanukah. We believe that its proposed placement on county-owned land violates the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state. This First Amendment separation is a principle held dear by the vast majority of Jews in America. Our particular history makes us sensitive to the abuses which can occur when any religion appears to be state sponsored, to the exclusion of others.

The Milwaukee Jewish Council does not stand alone in its opposition to the placement of religious symbols, including menorahs, on public land. In a recent national poll conducted by the American Jewish Committee, a national organization, 85% of all Jews polled,

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expressed strong opposition to the placement of a menorah on public property. In addition, 11 of the largest national Jewish organizations, spanning the entire religious and political spectrum, have expressed unanimous opposition to such use of a menorah. Those organizations, which have Milwaukee affiliates or chapters to which many, if not most Milwaukee Jews belong include: American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform), United Synagogue of America (Conservative), Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, Hadassah, Women's American ORT, Jewish Labor Committee, Jewish War Veterans, and the National Council of Jewish Women.

It is important for you to know that while the individual requesting the placement of the menorah is an honored member of the Jewish community, his request puts him at odds with almost all of the Milwaukee Jewish community. We believe that pluralism is not enhanced by creating a clutter of competing religious symbols on publicly owned property. We assert that the pluralism which is the great strength of American culture is best served by freedom from even the appearance of government endorsement of any religious group. Every act of government endorsement of any religion will certainly be read as an act of exclusion for those whose beliefs are not chosen for symbolic display by government.

In Milwaukee, we are blessed with a rich profusion of religious and ethnic vitality. There are many religious buildings in the form of churches and synagogues, there are religious schools by the dozens, and there is a wealth of private property owned by individuals who are proud to display religious symbols. These are all appropriate places

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for the display of religious symbols. In particular, the Jewish community owns a 28 acre tract of land which houses many of our major communal schools and agencies. It would be an ideal site for the placement of the menorah in question.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that the request which you are considering today may seem unimportant to you in the scope of the many significant issues also on your agenda. However, it must be pointed out that to the Jewish community, this issue is a raw nerve. In fact, this issue stirs up controversy wherever it touches down. The United States Supreme Court decisions on the subject could most charitably be described as confused and confusing. Therefore, we continue to pursue what we believe is good and sensible public policy: that religious symbols, including our menorah, be kept in the private domain, and that government make life easy for itself by refusing to create the appearance of endorsement of any religious group. I urge you to vote against the placement of the menorah as requested on county land. Thank you.