



# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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April 14, 2009

The Honorable Patricia Gerard  
Mayor  
City of Largo  
201 Highland Ave  
Largo FL 33779-0296

Dear Mayor Gerard:

On behalf of several City of Largo residents and other Florida members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), I urge you to immediately discontinue using City resources and taxpayer funds to plan, organize and promote the upcoming Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with nearly 14,000 members, including over 700 members in Florida, whose purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that the City of Largo, will host the 33rd Annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast on May 4, 2009. This event will take place at the Christian Life Enrichment Center at St. Paul United Methodist Church in Largo. The City of Largo (hereinafter City) is advertising this event on the official city website. Your name and government title are also prominently listed on the promotional materials being distributed for the event. Our complainants further inform us that tickets for this event are available only at City Hall.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits the government from endorsing, advancing or promoting religion. Therefore, it is grossly illegal and inappropriate for the City to be hosting, organizing, supporting or otherwise promoting a patently religious event, such as a prayer breakfast. This practice, which has been recurring for the last three decades, certainly has the effect of government endorsement of religion. The official prayer breakfast located at the Christian Enrichment Center sends the message that the City not only prefers religion over non-religion, but also Christianity over all other religions. It alienates non-believers in Largo by turning them into political outsiders in their own community.

Any reasonable City resident would logically interpret the City's actions in this case as government endorsement of religion. The City is prominently advertising a religious prayer event on the official City website. Residents interested in attending the prayer breakfast can only go to City Hall to get tickets. Finally, you appear to be sponsoring and attending the event in your official capacity as mayor of Largo. It is of no consequence that the breakfast will take place on private property. Given the high degree of City involvement and entanglement in the event,

any reasonable person would interpret this conduct as government espousal of religion.

The City must refrain from expending any further taxpayer dollars, using publicly funded employees, and drawing on any other publicly funded resources to host and promote the religious prayer breakfast. This includes publicizing the event on the City website, advertising and handling ticket sales, and being a sponsor (or co-sponsor) of the event.

It is not uncommon for ministerial associations or private groups to host a prayer breakfast and invite public officials, who attend as individuals. This is the case at the “National Prayer Breakfast” in D.C., for example. But it is absolutely unlawful, inappropriate and unseemly, under the First Amendment and Art. 1, Sec. 3 of the Florida State Constitution, for a mayor’s office itself to host such an event.

We ask that you take immediate steps to remedy the serious violations of the Establishment Clause the City’s involvement in the prayer breakfast presents. We further ask that you comply with your oath of office to protect and defend the United States and Florida constitutions. May we hear from you at your earliest convenience about what steps you have taken to ensure constitutional dictates are followed?

Sincerely,

Rebecca S. Kratz  
Staff Attorney