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Council decides prayers will continue

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By MIKE FERGUSON

Baker City Herald

The prospect of taking away the prayer that opens many Baker City Council meetings, it turns out, never had a prayer.

Speaker after speaker urged city councilors Tuesday to keep the prayer as part of city council meetings and not to refer the matter to voters. In the end, councilors voted unanimously to remove the word "non-sectarian" from the council's five "Invocation Guidelines" and determined by consensus not to send the issue to the November ballot.

Roger Scovil, pastor of the Baker City Christian Church, said that prayer is important in every aspect of human activity "and that certainly includes the human activity of government."

"Prayer is the sacred opportunity to call upon the creator of all things, the God of the Holy Bible," Scovil said. "God establishes all governments, and honors and blesses the governments that look to him for protection."

Noting that the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate both open their sessions with prayers, Scovil paraphrased Benjamin Franklin when, he said, a similar debate raged during the founding of the republic: "Do we imagine we no longer need God's assistance?"



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"You invite people to pray according to their conscience, in the way we are instructed," he said. "A Muslim will pray in the name of Allah, a Buddhist according to the teachings of Buddha. I won't feel excluded if you invite people of other beliefs to pray at this meeting.

"In the name of freedom," Scovil said just before a loud ovation, "allow people to pray according to the teachings of their faith and their conscience."

Don Williams said he worried that instructing people how to pray would "make God generic, a meaningless and uninvited guest to this forum."

Even allowing sectarian prayers, he said, shows "a broad tolerance of what this country is about."

"You have been very tolerant of all prayers, and now you're being asked to be intolerant," Williams said.

He warned that if councilors give up the practice of opening meetings with prayer, churches would stop entering floats in parades and offering Easter sunrise services in public parks.

Bill Harvey, who lives in Haines but owns a Baker City construction business, called it "a joy" to pray for "wisdom, guidance, strength and help."

"I am human, and I can't make all the decisions on my own," he said. "I am sure tonight that many are praying for our city."

Gary Dielman, who sparked Tuesday's discussion when he criticized a prayer offered by Bob Vanderbilt to open the July 8 City Council meeting —Vanderbilt closed his prayer with the words "In Jesus' name, amen," — did not attend Tuesday's meeting.

Dielman declined to comment until he'd heard a tape of Tuesday's meeting.

Councilor Terry Schumacher said he hoped Dielman would take the hint from the outpouring of public support for prayer at council meetings "and quit coming back and doing this."

But Councilor Beverly Calder said that dissent is "an American right" and "quite often represents other unspoken voices."

Councilor Andrew Bryan was one of the few who "saw the logic" of putting a charter change on the ballot to let voters decide whether to include prayer and the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance on City Council meeting agendas.

"If we want an invocation and the Pledge, we want to set it on



the hardest rock we have," he said. "If people really want the invocation and Pledge, the best way to assure that is to put it in the charter."

"You can put it in the charter or paint it on a wall," countered Councilor Dennis Dorrah. "That still won't change Mr. Dielman or someone else coming in here and raising heck about it."

At least the issue drew a crowd to Tuesday night's meeting, Calder noted.

"You came because this matter is important to you," she told the full house. "It's nice to have full council chambers. I wish we could have something this meaty at every meeting."

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