

El Paso Mayor Attacks Churches, Blocks Recall Election

In the wake of a controversial battle against Christian ministries in the Texas state, El Paso Mayor John Cook has failed to stop a recall election against him and two city council members.

Cook sued Tom Brown Ministries, Word of Life Church of El Paso, El Pasoans for Traditional Family Values and other local citizens to silence them from speaking out against the mayor's policies that impact El Paso families.

On Monday a state judge officially denied Cook's request for a preliminary injunction to stop the recall election. The case is ongoing with a trial set for June.

Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) attorneys, who represent the parties being attacked by Cook, filed a counterclaim against him that is still pending before the court.

"Churches and ministries shouldn't live in fear of being punished by the government for exercising their constitutionally protected right to free speech," said ADF Senior legal Counsel Joel Oster, who argued before the court on behalf of the parties sued by Cook.

"The mayor is seeking to silence those who oppose his policies because he doesn't like their views, but that's neither legal nor constitutional. The recall petitions were circulated and submitted in full accordance with the law, and he cannot stop the election just because he doesn't like the fact that some groups participated in a legitimate effort that he doesn't favor."

In one instance, the mayor told a woman who spoke on the issue at a city council meeting, "You can take your freedom of speech outside."

In November 2010, El Paso voters, by popular petition, placed on the ballot and passed an ordinance prohibiting unmarried domestic partner benefits. Despite this, certain members of the city council voted to rescind the ordinance passed by the voters, and the mayor approved.

In response to the council's defiance of the people's expressed will, a grass-roots recall campaign sought to remove the mayor and council members who ignored the vote of the people. The mayor then filed suit alleging that the church violated Texas election law by circulating a petition. ADF attorneys have filed a federal suit against the law to have it declared unconstitutional.