

Minnesota City Halts Church Expansion Plans

✖ The city of Medina, Minnesota, is trying to stop a 1,000-plus-member church from moving ahead with its building expansion plans—on its own property.

Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) attorneys filed a lawsuit Thursday on behalf of Woodridge Church against the city of Medina for allegedly manufacturing a new zoning ordinance to prevent the church from building a new 42,000-square foot facility.

Shortly after Woodridge Church submitted its application for the expansion, city officials placed a moratorium on church construction citywide for one year. During that time, the city created a new zoning district. The new district prohibits construction of any building over 40,000 square feet. The church's planned expansion is 42,000 square feet.

"Churches should not be singled out for discrimination by a city's zoning restrictions," says ADF Senior Legal Counsel Joel Oster. "Customizing ordinances and setting moratoriums with the specific purpose to curtail church growth is unconstitutional and specifically prohibited by federal law."

Woodridge Church owns nearly 28 acres of property and has recently expanded to more than 1,000 members. To accommodate its various growing ministries, the church began working with city officials in April 2008 to develop plans in compliance with the city code before submitting its building application.

During the moratorium, the city devised a new "Rural Public/Semi-Public" zoning district, which includes three parcels of land: Woodridge Church, city hall, and another church. The city hall building already complies with the square-footage limitation, and the city has no current plans to expand.

In the spring of 2009, the City Council rejected the City Planning Commission's recommendation to limit buildings in the zone to 45,000 square feet and instead set the limit to 40,000 square feet, which kept the church's 42,000-square-foot plans from meeting compliance. After the city adopted the ordinance restricting construction in the RPS zone, it lifted the moratorium.

ADF attorneys contend that the city's restrictive zoning ordinance is in direct violation of the U.S. Constitution, the Minnesota Constitution, and federal law—specifically, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, which prevents zoning officials from singling out churches for discriminatory treatment.

Charles Shreffler is serving as local counsel in the lawsuit, Woodridge Church v. City of Medina, which was filed with the U.S. District Court for the District of Minnesota.