

Noah's Ark Theme Park Wants Bible-Believing Employees, Kentucky Makes Threats

The developer of a Noah's Ark-based theme park in Kentucky said on Wednesday he would fight for his religious rights after state officials warned he could lose millions in potential tax credits if he hires only people who believe in the biblical flood.

Ark Encounter, which is slated to open in 2016 in Williamston, Kentucky, is not hiring anyone yet, but its parent company, Answers in Genesis, asks employees to sign a faith statement including a belief in creationism and the flood.

State officials and Ark Encounter lawyers have exchanged letters in which the state threatened not to proceed with tax incentives for the park if there was discriminatory hiring practices, a state official confirmed on Wednesday.

The letters between the parties came to light after the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and the *Lexington Herald-Leader* obtained them through open records requests.

"We're hoping the state takes a hard look at their position, and changes their position so it doesn't go further than this," Ark Encounter's Executive President Mike Zovath told Reuters.

Zovath, who is also co-founder of Answers in Genesis, said that if tax incentives for the project are withdrawn because it does not give written assurances the state now seeks, it would violate the organization's First Amendment and state constitutional rights.

Plans for the park include a wooden replica of the ark during

the \$73-million first phase and other biblical-themed attractions will be added in phases. The project has been financed through donations and bonds, but Zavath said the state's incentives could help finance future phases.

In July, Ark Encounter, LLC, received preliminary approval to collect a rebate from a portion of the sales tax revenues generated at its park.

The tourism tax credit is potentially worth more than \$18 million over a 10-year period.

Zovath said the state has added a requirement about hiring practices that is not part of the existing tourism tax credits law.

But a state official said on Wednesday that everybody knows laws regarding hiring practices and that the states doesn't need to elaborate them for companies seeking incentives.

"We expect all of the companies that get tax incentives to obey the law," Gil Lawson, communications director for the Kentucky Tourism, Arts and Heritage Cabinet, said.

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