

Lori Wagner's Letter to the Editor

"To the Editor:

Since a 1952 Congressional resolution, people have gathered for prayer for our nation on the National Day of Prayer. Troy NDP events organized by the local task force over the past decade have been intercessory prayer meetings – not holidays or celebrations. The group requesting permission to gather this year is the same one that has met at City Hall for the past ten years (see www.troyndp.org)

The event was renamed "Troy NDP Christian Observance" not to be exclusionary, but simply to identify who was speaking and praying, so people would know what type of event was being conducted and come if they wanted to... or not if they didn't. In America, those of all faiths are free to organize events appropriate to their belief systems. Instead of organizing an interfaith or different prayer function, a few vocal individuals have tried to impose their view of what is acceptable on the event that we have organized.

A well organized attack against our request made to council on March 7 featured inflammatory remarks as well as inaccurate and incomplete information resulting in the denial of the request. John Szerlag, City Manager, authored a memo prior to the meeting explaining that the city could open Veterans' Plaza to different groups throughout the [N]ational [D]ay of [P]rayer. In addition, the legal department issued a memo stating that the plaza has been used by different groups for non-city-sponsored events. The city council has not officially designated Veterans' Plaza as a public forum; however, the fact that private groups have conducted such events in the past means that our constitutional rights of free assembly and free speech are being denied.

Last year, I spoke with Padma Kuppa, the Hindu woman who had approached me about our event and explained that we are part of a national group (see nationaldayofprayer.org) Anyone is welcome to attend our event, but we have the right to determine who can speak at it.

Ms. Kuppa, who spoke against our resolution to council, has known our position since she contacted me a year ago and at that time accused me of "persecuting" other faiths by not inviting them to lead prayer in our event – stating that we must be diverse as the community of Troy is.

Our position is that diversity does not amalgamate our faiths, forcing us to merge into one belief system on any subject – religion or otherwise. Instead it allows the freedom to function within our subgroups while at the same time offering mutual respect for one another's beliefs.

Diversity is something to be valued, but our Constitution and the Bill of Rights of the United States of America is a higher value. If citizens can't meet on the steps of City Hall, where has our freedom gone? If Veterans' Plaza is open to anyone, it must legally be open to all. Our state and national capitals have "first-come first-served" systems in place for any group to meet, the only restrictions being on the sound, litter, etc. – not the content of the message. This isn't about religion. It's about every citizen's right to peacefully assemble on public property and should be of paramount concern to all U.S. citizens.

We hope that by working with the city in a spirit of compromise we can have a resolution in this matter pleasing to all. I have no slogans to offer: I only ask that those who live, work and worship in Troy examine

the facts of what is happening within the city and work diligently to protect their constitutional rights as American citizens – rights which seem to be in jeopardy in Troy.

Lori Wagner
Coordinator, Troy National Day of Prayer Christian Task Force”