

11/8/05

Policy Statement re Holiday Decorations

Background. For decades, the Town has strung white lights on several of the major trees in the major commercial centers as a symbol to celebrate the winter holiday season. More recently, in response to the Garden Club's offer, wreaths and garlands have been added to the façade of Town Hall, and the library buildings. The Town's employees have decorated the interior of its buildings in ways of their own choosing. For example, the Police Station has been decorated with a lighted tree and a menorah for the last several years.

In December 2004, a request was received that the petitioner be allowed to place, and light, a menorah on the Town Hall grounds. The request verbalized the petitioner's sincerely held view that the Garden Club's decoration of Town Hall represented exclusively a Christian tradition. Upon review, the Board of Selectmen determined that the best solution under all of the circumstances at that time would be to invite the placing of a menorah for one night, and to permit a lighting ceremony (the petitioner advised it would be a non religious ceremony), and then in due course to develop a current policy on the overall subject.

Towards this end, the Board has now invited public comments to gain the current sense of the community on the subject. The existing opinions of the United States Supreme Court have been reviewed. Due deliberation has occurred. This policy statement is a result of that deliberation.

Policy Statement. The Town reasserts once again its total commitment to celebrate the winter holiday season without regard to any one or more specific religious traditions. Wellesley reaffirms that it is a fully inclusive community. Upon review of the entire circumstances, the Board of Selectmen continues to view the stringing of white lights on the major trees at the Town's intersections to be a symbol to celebrate the winter season, without regard to any particular religion. The same could probably be said of the wreaths and garlands on the Town Hall and other municipal buildings, but given the views expressed last year (referenced above), the Town wishes to do more to respect the importance of symbolism, the existence of many religious traditions, including the Jewish tradition, and to find a way which in this Board's view accommodates a broader range of appropriate celebration symbols while at the same time not crossing over the constitutional line which respects the separation of religion and state.

Accordingly, the Town's policy is as follows:

1. Stringing of white lights will continue at the commercial centers as above described and in accordance with the Town's historical practice.

2. The Town Hall and other municipal buildings may be decorated with garlands and wreaths. In addition, a separate space (for example, in front of the bell at Town Hall) will be reserved for individual symbols representative of specific recognized traditions, such as a lighted tree (Christmas), Menorah (Hanukkah), and Crescent (Muslim). These specific symbols are hereby approved. If others are proposed, the Board will consider whether they are symbols from generally recognized traditions. All symbols permitted in this area will be of roughly equal size. They will be put up together and removed together, on dates selected by the Board of Selectmen. They may be lighted throughout the period or for such lesser time as the tradition dictates. (For example, the Menorah is expected to be lighted during the 8 days of Hanukkah).

3. The interior of Town Hall and other municipal buildings will be decorated substantially in accordance with the above, that is, any department wishing to decorate will make a reasonable effort to display one symbol of each tradition of roughly equal size and prominence..

4. No religious ceremony will occur on any town owned property.

5. The Board of Selectmen recognizes it is not the Town Board in charge of all municipal buildings. Boards having jurisdiction of other town land and buildings will be informed of this policy, and encouraged to adopt it with the hope that this policy will be town wide and uniformly held.

Adopted as a Town Policy by the Board of Selectmen this 15th day of November, 2005.

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W. J. J.