

Creche plan is workable, leaders say

But religious community withholds full blessing

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Mixing the two sides of Christmas — religious and secular — as proposed for the Eden Park Nativity scene is a workable compromise to maintain a 50-year tradition, local religious leaders say.

But if they had their druthers, many would prefer the creche be kept purely religious and moved off public land, said the Rev. Duane Holm, director of the Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati (MARCC).

"My estimation of where (religious) leaders are is that individually, they would prefer a religious display on private property," Holm said. "But as citizens of the community, I think they are probably relieved that a way can be found to prevent a real misunderstanding . . ."

The Eden Park Nativity scene was turned down two weeks ago by the Cincinnati Park Board. Board members expressed concerns that the display was unconstitutional because it contained religious symbols and was on public property.

Strolling Santa

The display could get a second chance if it tones down its religious message, according to an opinion from the Cincinnati city solicitor's office. The park board, which voted Aug. 28 to deny a permit for the display, is scheduled to consider a revised plan on Sept. 14.

The new plan emphasizes items such as Christmas trees, wreaths and candy canes in an attempt to better tie the creche with the annual Christmas display next door at the Krohn Conservatory. A costumed Santa Claus, who usually greets people inside the conservatory, would come outside to stroll

The Nativity scene, a stable with live animals and life-sized wax figures — which has been displayed on the conservatory's lawn since 1967 under the sponsorship of Western-Southern Life Insurance Co. — was ousted based on an opinion from the city solicitor. The creche alone, the opinion stated, could be illegal under a July U.S. Supreme Court decision.

'Second best'

Holm said the secularized creche was "second best," when compared with the option of keeping it religious and moving it to private land.

"But if this will meet the court's test, most can live with it, even if that kind of secularization isn't their personal choice," he said.

Michael Rapp, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Cincinnati, said the council would not protest the creche if it is allowed in Eden Park.

"Our position remains the same — we are opposed in terms of policy to religious symbols on public property," Rapp said. "But it would appear that the creche with secular symbols would meet standards."

But the proposed revisions do bother City Councilman Paul Booth. He has asked the solicitor to study another option: Why not lease the city-owned land next to the conservatory to Western-Southern during the Christmas season? The land then would be considered private property, Booth said.

"My concern is that it (the display) would continue to get watered down, continued to get altered. It could be an unending thing," Booth said. "It really has disturbed me. All this could throw off what they're trying to do."