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Poster will come down, Helms says

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The dispute over a religious **poster** in the Greene County Circuit Clerk's office ended Monday when Circuit Clerk **Steve Helms** announced he'd removed the display.

"At the advice of my counsel, I will relocate the **poster** off county property," said **Helms**, referring to a placard dedicated to the victims of Sept. 11, 2001 that bore the Ten Commandments and a reference to Jesus Christ. "It was never my intention to do anything wrong."

The announcement was delivered at a news conference outside the Greene County Courthouse. Attorneys Dee Wampler and Joseph Passanise, whom **Helms** retained last week, were also on hand.

After "hours going over the law and looking at the **poster** in question," the lawyers decided the display's placement might not stand up in court, Wampler said. "There was a chance we would lose the lawsuit."

The decision came a week after Springfield resident Gary Wright called the News-Leader to voice his concern about the **poster**.

Wright first saw the display in late June during a visit to the office. He asked **Helms** to take it down, claiming it represented an unconstitutional government endorsement of religion.

Wright threatened litigation if the **poster** was not removed in a week.

"I feel like he did the right thing," Wright said. "It's gracious of him to take it down." Until Monday, **Helms** had stood by the **poster**, saying it represents the Judeo-Christian ethics the country was founded on.

In the **poster's** place, **Helms** said he'll seek out a **poster** commemorating the victims of Sept. 11 that's less controversial.

"I'm disappointed in the sense that we had to take it down," **Helms** said. "As a public official, I will abide by the law."

He defended his motives for hanging it in the office lobby nearly four months ago.

"I thought it was proper to honor the men and women who died in Sept. 11," he said. He noted that he'd received overwhelming support in his decision.

Indeed, several spectators at the news conference applauded **Helms** for displaying the **poster**, one woman calling him a hero. Two elderly veterans who were awarded the Purple Heart were also on hand, at **Helms'** invitation.

Helms faces two opponents in the Aug. 5 Republican primary for his office.

Asked whether his decision to hang the **poster** was motivated by politics, the clerk dismissed that notion, noting he put up the **poster** nearly four months ago.

"If I would've put this up a week or two ago, I think you might have a basis for that,"

Helms said. "I did not go to the newspaper, Mr. Wright did. I have only responded in this incident."

Reached Monday morning, Wright had not yet heard of **Helms'** decision.

He said it was never his intent to cause controversy over the **poster**, only that the circuit clerk comply with the law.

"There are people of goodwill on both sides of this issue," Wright said. "I feel like the message of Christians is not so feeble that it needs to be propped up by government."

Last week, Wright wrote a letter explaining his case to each of Greene County's judges. He also contacted Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a Washington, D.C.-based group that handles similar issues.

"Now we can let the issue drop," Wright said.

Though he'll no longer display the placard in his office, **Helms** will continue to advocate it.

He announced he's obtained nearly 100 copies of the **poster** from its creator, Springfield resident Jeremiah Youmans.

Helms invited anyone who'd like to display the **poster** to contact him, at home, for a copy.

"I'm going to give it away," **Helms** said. "My goal is to find businesses and organizations that would be willing to put it up."

For his part, Youmans, the **poster's** creator, was disappointed in **Helms'** decision.

"I really expected more fight from Wampler and **Steve**," he said. "It was all too easy."

Youmans first produced the **poster** in the fall of 2002, he said. He'd long been meaning to design a **poster** bearing the Ten Commandments and decided to dedicate it to victims of Sept. 11 after seeing a commemorative car decal.

"It was an afterthought," he said.

Youmans estimated he's given away thousands of copies of his creation. Concerned that not enough of the **poster's** images were original, he recently released a redesigned copy, which he sells for \$24.95 (plus \$5 shipping and handling) from his Web site, www.namelessheroes.net.

"I don't really care about the money," said Youmans, a cashier at George's Steakhouse on South Glenstone Avenue. "It's nice to sell a few now and again," he said, but he noted he'd prefer to give them to charities, for fundraising purposes.

"I did it for the glory of God and country."

Video report: View portions of **Steve Helms'** news conference.

News chat: What do you think? Add your comment by clicking on this story at News-Leader.com

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