

# Religious reference generates complaint

By Denise Ruttan

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A national organization advocating the separation of church and state is concerned about Aumsville's use of the phrase "belief in God" in regards to "staff team values" on its city Web site.

An Aumsville resident, Andy Antonson, contacted the Columbia chapter of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. The organization has nearly 75,000 members nationally and publicizes local situations involving the separation of church and state.

Antonson, a Buddhist, initially wrote to the city, saying the statement "supports a single view regarding faith and excludes those who do not share this view," according to a press release from Americans United. After writing to the city, Antonson contacted American United.

The phrase in contention is at the end of the city's Web site, where the city lists its team mission statement and "staff team values." The 13 values include "Faith/Religion: Belief in God." Other values have to do with adaptability, balance, courage, family and volunteerism.

The city received an e-mail in October last year asking that the reference to God be removed, city administrator Maryann Hills said. The city removed the statement after the initial contact. Hills consulted the city's attorney and a second legal opinion.

"We did modify our Web site to make it clear that these were our staff team values," Hills said. "We changed the wording on the Web site and put a disclosure at the end."

The city's Web site was modified in November.

Bruce Adams, the president of the Columbia chapter of Americans United, said any statement reflects the city's position.

"I was very surprised to see it because I don't know of any other government agency that's done anything like this," Adams said. "If we did know of some, we would be contacting them."

Hills said staff members developed the list of values in a team-building exercise during several staff meetings. In the exercise, staff members chose their top five values out of a deck of 38



City of  
Aumsville

Home of the Corn Festival

This site last updated 07/29/09

Aumsville City Hall/Police Complex - Built 2009



Front page of city website

## Links

Aumsville's city Web site is [www.aumsville.us](http://www.aumsville.us).

To learn more about Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, go to [www.au.org](http://www.au.org), or for the Columbia chapter go to [www.keepthemseparate.org](http://www.keepthemseparate.org)

## A closer look

Americans United Columbia chapter membership includes religious and non-religious people who come together to work locally in support of religious liberty and church/state separation, according to its Web site.

The organization was founded in 1947.

Americans United has 75,000 members nationally, and the nationwide executive director is an ordained minister.

cards in a values-based leadership training program.

"Everybody who participated chose to do so and it was voluntary. The views of some may not be that of all," Hills said.

The original card read "belief in higher power" but staff members elected to change the statement to "belief in God," Hills said.

"We felt staff had a right to have that opinion," Hills said.

"It's not unusual for a group to do values or team-building activities. The difference is when it gets published on a Web site," Adams said. "If this was a public school, and some of the teachers value a belief in God, this could be a real problem for some parents who could pull their kids from those classrooms."

Hills and Mayor Harold White were contacted by Americans United. Hills brought up the issue as an informational item at an Aumsville City Council meeting July 27.

Hills said some staff members felt if the wording were changed or the value removed, the list wouldn't be a true reflection of their team beliefs.

"We are an equal-opportunity employer and we did not require employees to participate or require them to have a belief in God," Hills said.

Adams said such a statement isn't appropriate for a city Web site.

"City employees have a right to keep their religious beliefs private," Adams said. "The city government should stick to running the city and should not use the city Web site to post the religious beliefs of employees."

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