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City school board member says letter on Bible is topic

Sunday, October 12, 2014

By PAUL COLLINS - Bulletin Staff Writer

The Martinsville School Board will have a special closed-door meeting Oct. 21 when it likely will discuss a letter from Liberty Counsel concerning the board's denial of a local pastor's request that Gideons Bibles be distributed in city schools.

Liberty Counsel, a nonprofit law firm, is asking the board to approve the request by Pastor Bill Moss of Hill Memorial Baptist Church to distribute the Bibles.

The meeting will be at 1 p.m. at the school board office at 746 Indian Trail.

According to a public notice of the meeting, the board will consider a motion to enter closed session for "discussion and consultation with legal counsel and briefings by staff members, attorneys or consultants pertaining to actual or probable litigation, or other specific legal matters requiring the provision of legal advice by such counsel, as authorized by Section 2.2-3711 (A) (7) of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act."

After the closed session, the board will reopen the public meeting, certify the proceedings and adjourn, according to the public notice.

School board member Dr. Craig Dietrich said Friday the meeting is being called for the sole purpose of discussing the Liberty Counsel letter.

"The meeting is with legal counsel — to see what our options are, what our liabilities are. I wouldn't expect we would make a decision right then," he said.

Carolyn McCraw, board vice chairperson, said the special meeting "is an opportunity for us to discuss it (the letter from Liberty Counsel)." She added that she couldn't say whether the board will take action at that meeting.

Moss requested at the school board's June 26 and Aug. 11 meetings that the board allow Gideons Bibles/New Testaments to be distributed in city schools — distributed in the sense of being made available for any student who wants one, which is called passive distribution.

School board Chairman Robert Williams announced at the board's Sept. 8 meeting that following the advice of legal counsel, the board will not to allow Bibles to be distributed in city schools.

He stated in part, "we have an obligation to remain neutral in matters of religion as reflected in our school board's written policy, rules, and another of our policy rules clearly states that any materials distributed to our schools must relate to the educational mission of the Martinsville City Schools."

McCraw said Friday she agrees with Williams' statement that the school board has an obligation to remain neutral in matters of religion. She also cited the issue of separation of church and state.

She added that she feels the board's policy is appropriate.

The board's policy on distribution of information/materials states, in part, "Approval will be granted only for materials from governmental organizations and nonprofit community organizations regarding activities related to the educational mission of (the school division)."

At the school board's Oct. 6 meeting, Moss said Liberty Counsel had sent the letter to members of the school board and some school division officials.

The letter contends that the school board's denial of Moss' request was improper for several reasons, including that the board's policy on distribution of information/materials is vague, that several Virginia Standards of Learning relate to the Bible and that some secular organizations have been allowed to distribute literature but distribution of Bibles has been denied.

The letter, dated Oct. 1, asks for a response in writing within 30 days "whether Hill Memorial Baptist Church will be permitted to distribute its desired literature"

Dietrich said Friday he isn't overly worried about responding during that time frame.

"As long as we're working on something," he thinks the board could receive more time, he said.

Neither Martinsville Schools Superintendent Pam Heath nor Williams could not be reached Friday afternoon.



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