

Bible museum begins construction in D.C., but curriculum is shelved

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Construction began on the Museum of the Bible, founded and funded by Hobby Lobby's Steve Green, in Washington, D.C., this fall, while an Oklahoma school district shelved his Bible curriculum.

The high-tech museum, set to open in fall 2017, is four blocks from the U.S. Capitol and two blocks from the National Mall. The new museum will feature standing exhibits on the history and impact of the Bible as well as interactive features on Bible stories and characters.

Green, who has a world-class collection of Bible artifacts, told Religion News Service that believers, skeptics, and the "intellectually curious" alike can visit and learn.

"The Bible can speak for itself, explain itself," he said. "There really isn't a barrier for this book."

Blowback since the museum's announcement in 2011 doesn't bother him.

"Anytime you do anything with the Bible, people respond with emotion—emotion for and against it," he said. "That people want to express their love or their hate is not surprising."

Religious freedom, Green said, is a biblical concept. The Green family—generations of Pentecostals and Baptists—has funded Bible scholarship, biblical archaeology, and the drafting of a proposed public school curriculum on the Bible.

Two groups that opposed the elective curriculum said in late November that the public schools in Mustang, Oklahoma, just a few miles from Hobby Lobby headquarters, decided not to use the curriculum, which was approved in April by the school board.

“In summary, the topic of a Bible course in the Mustang School District is no longer a discussion item nor is there a plan to provide such a course in the foreseeable future,” Superintendent Sean McDaniel wrote in an e-mail to the Freedom from Religion Foundation and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The two groups, working with the American Civil Liberties Union, had filed a freedom-of-information request concerning the school board’s role with the curriculum.

“Education officials in Mustang did the wise thing,” said Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. “Objective study about religion in public schools is permissible, but this curriculum was essentially an extended Sunday school lesson.”

The superintendent wrote that the district was not able to review the final curriculum, nor did it receive a “commitment to provide legal coverage to the district” if faced with a lawsuit—both of which he termed “non-negotiables.”

When the Mustang school board made 220 pages of a course textbook public this summer, church-state experts suggested that its claims and assumptions amounted to teaching the Bible from a particular religious perspective, which the Supreme Court has banned in public schools.

“In its current form, sectarian bias, including the principle that the Bible is inerrant, is built into the structure,” said Mark Chancey, a religion professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Jerry Pattengale, senior editor for the high school curriculum, said he looks forward to working with other school districts.

“We understand Mustang’s decision to withdraw the new, elective Bible course from consideration,” said Pattengale, who also is executive director of education for the Museum of the Bible. “Museum of the Bible remains committed to providing an elective high school Bible curriculum and continues work on an innovative, high-tech course that will provide students and teachers with a scholarly overview of the Bible’s history, narrative, and impact.”

The curriculum editors plan to include connections to the Greens’ vast collection of biblical artifacts, to be featured in the museum.

In June, Green's company won a closely watched Supreme Court decision that granted corporations such as Hobby Lobby religious exemptions from covering women's contraception in company health insurance plans. —Religion News Service