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ASSOCIATION OF

# SECULAR ELECTED OFFICIALS

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William S. Duffey, Jr., Chair  
Matthew Mashburn  
Sara Tindal Ghazal  
Edward Lindsey  
Janice W. Johnston  
Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger

Dear Chairman Duffey,

As a fellow resident of the State of Georgia, and as President and Founder of the Association of Secular Elected Officials (ASEO), I and my fellow board members commend you on your inclusive invocation during a recent preceding of the State Board of Commissioners. We appreciate your recognition of people who practice a religion other than Christianity, and particularly your nod to the growing number of “nones” in our state and nation, such as atheists like me. To simply be recognized as fellow Americans—and voters—is a large reason why I started the ASEO. The mission of our organization is to protect the Constitutional right to freedom of religion, defend the separation of state and religion, to dispel the prejudice against the nonreligious community, encourage other members of this community to run for office, and make our democracy stronger.

While we respect the rights of those who believe in a god(s), we also contend that religious beliefs are not a prerequisite for being a good person with strong moral convictions. Our members shape policy based on informed, evidence-based decisions, with a heavy reliance on empathy and personal experience.

At a time when the secular community has gone from being ignored and misunderstood to openly attacked and maligned under the rise of White Christian Nationalism, to know that there are public servants who respectfully recognize that there are those who follow no religion is something where I and my fellow board members give credit where it's due. Members of the secular community do not ask for special recognition. Despite what White Christian Nationalist politicians and figureheads like to project, we do not strive to create policies and procedures that deny people their rights to individual liberty: *our goal is to foster a culture in public places and in government where all can freely exercise their rights in a manner that respects who they are as individuals.*

To that end, while I and my fellow board members enthusiastically thank you for your inclusive language at a recent invocation, I write this open letter to also invite you and any others who open government-affiliated meetings with a prayerful invocation to reconsider this practice altogether.

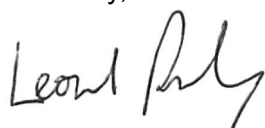
The backlash from your inclusive statement underscores that invocations invite unnecessary contentiousness, and ironically so given that invocations are meant to inspire unity and common purpose. Prayer, especially when we do anything to defy the underlying assumption of whom it is actually intended for, is increasingly becoming an archaic and non-inclusive way to begin public meetings. No matter how inclusive an invocation is, someone will feel excluded, or worse, actively marginalized and disenfranchised from the deliberative process that is, in theory, open to all. What happened in response to your commitment to valuing non-Christian members of the public is a frustrating example of what happens when we bring religion into government, even with the best intentions.

It's time to retire the practice of invocations to start meetings. If they no longer serve to bring us together in common purpose, then we must find alternatives. We at ASEO recommend a variety of such alternatives, including but not limited to partnering with local tribes to create thoughtful acknowledgments of the land and the first caretakers of it. Not only does this serve to honor our past while creating policies for the future, but more importantly, it can create bridges that uplift even more people that our communities serve by inviting meaningful collaboration with tribal governments and additional stakeholders. We strongly recommend that if your or any governing body has not already [adopted a land acknowledgment](#), to do so in direct collaboration with the tribes on whose land the bodies govern.

Moreover, one of our board members also reflects on how she along with her colleagues created “guiding principles” during a retreat that are now read before every council meeting—values such as economic vitality, environmental stewardship, and of course, inclusion, diversity, equity, and accountability (IDEA). To work with colleagues and members of the public to define which common, secular values all elected officials and other public servants will work toward and strive to make decisions on, is rewarding in and of itself, and in the long run, far more meaningful to the secular purpose of the state and its governing bodies.

To that end, I and the board members of the Association of Secular Elected Officials once again thank you for your time, your commitment to public service, and for your understanding of the diverse body of citizens you work for. We hope you take the time to consider the suggestions we presented in this letter, and invite you to collaborate with us to further explore alternatives to invocations to replace antiquated practices with new traditions that can carry us further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leonard Presberg". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Leonard Presberg

President

Association of Secular Elected Officials, Inc.