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Allendale Council hoping to broaden holiday decorations policy

BY KAREN KLEIMANN

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While Allendale Council members thought it was a good idea to be more inclusive of religious holidays, residents Judith Friedland and Melissa Bildner's request for a menorah to be placed in front of Borough Hall for Hanukkah may have to wait another year for the council to examine the legal ramifications and measure the community's response.

Mayor Vince Barra said at the Dec. 6 work session that though the Mayor and Council doesn't participate in any holiday functions and that has been the tradition in years past, he personally thinks the borough can start new traditions and will after all the issues, concerns and viewpoints have been addressed.

"Currently there is not a menorah at Borough Hall but there are beautiful Christmas



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decorations ... and we think it would be a nice complement to also have the menorah there," Friedland said.

She said Allendale is one of the few towns in the area that doesn't have a menorah or any Hanukkah decorations on display, and "there are a lot of Jewish families that celebrate Hanukkah in our town and we think it would be great for them to feel like their holiday is referenced."

Bildner added that it's important for Jewish families and especially the children to have representation so that they "can see that we live in a diverse community, which is a beautiful community. The decorations are beautiful but sometimes you want to feel like your holiday is here also. So it's just something to consider."

"I think we probably should start a new tradition and be more welcoming of everybody, including Jewish residents or any other ethnic or religious groups," Barra said.

He added that there is a small menorah

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downstairs in the hallway of Borough Hall but "we've always had a tradition to not have anything on borough property, we do have lights on the tree out here and we do have wreaths, but I guess the Allendale Christmas tree has always been the one in front of the [Allendale Bar & Grill] and it's the one that's been officially lit at the time of the holiday walk."

Barra acknowledged that other towns have menorahs but most of them don't have religious decorations on display at their respective Borough Hall.

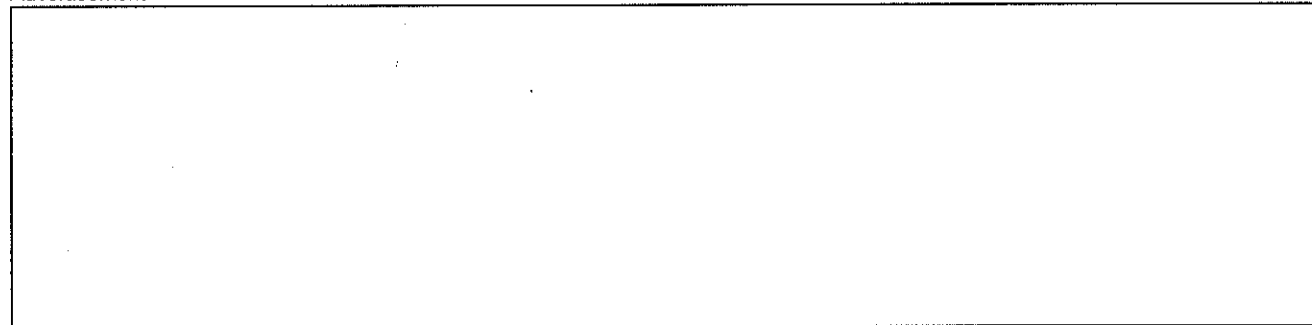
"From my perspective I think we should do it, but I think we should do it the right way," he said.

From here, the council would take a closer look through the Facilities, Parks and Recreation Committee to find a good place for the menorah while taking a look at the state and federal legislation regarding religious decorations on municipal property and gauge the response of the community.



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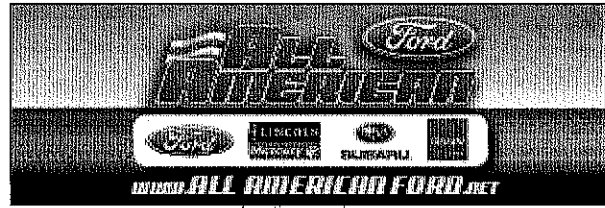
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Barra suggested that the council communicate formally and informally with the borough residents. He added for the record that he met with Friedland, Bildner and a rabbi previously on this request and from here he suggested the council engage all the religious leaders to have a "nice, ecumenical tribute to the season."

Councilwoman and Facilities, Parks and Recreation Committee member Amy Wilczynski said it's going to be a process because while the borough would like to just put up a menorah this holiday season, it has to consider the laws as these requests have become increasingly "complicated," using the example of a recent case where a group of atheists wanted to put up a sign that reflected their viewpoint in a borough hall.



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"We do have to go to some of the other communities and do it right," she said, cautioning against other groups who might get "upset" using the examples of changing titles of holiday celebrations from a "Christmas walk" to a "holiday walk" and as a result of having to "tone down certain things, so we just have to make sure we're in line with other viewpoints."

Barra said he didn't think it would be an issue and "maybe we'll be the council that starts a new tradition in Allendale, not maybe, we will."

"I think we will start a new tradition, and hopefully next year at this time we'll have something in front of Borough Hall that will be good and pleasing and we may even think about different things we may want to do during the Christmas season and holiday season and Hanukkah, to make it more of a total community involvement," Barra said.

Friedland said that there are plans being discussed with AB&G owner Chris Kunisch to have a menorah outside the restaurant

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and a lighting of the menorah. They are just trying to figure out the best day.

Council members provided their own viewpoints, most agreeing it's a good idea but they need time to "do it right."

"I think you have a wonderful idea and I think this is a great opportunity but I agree with Amy that we have to be sure that legally it's OK," Councilwoman Liz White said.

Barra added that there is a tendency for the rule "no good deed goes unpunished" to occur when the borough has looked to do "nice" things in the past.

He said the council wants to make sure it's done right and "everyone is on board and it addresses everybody's concerns and issues. And it's done in a good, positive way."



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Councilman Ari Bernstein said as far as the limitations of church and state go, the council "would rather include everyone than exclude anyone."

Bildner said at times "we do feel excluded as a Jewish family in town sometimes when you don't have your holiday or any decorations."

"I think it might make the most sense to do something here at Borough Hall and then we avoid issues of private organizations and everything else," Barra said.

Council President Bob Shoepflin said the approach should be balanced but "my only concern is, where does it stop?" He said he thinks it should be sent to a committee and then have it make a recommendation.



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"From the first moment I was on the council I've questioned why we're not more inclusive," Councilwoman Susan LaMonica said. "But I do understand in a municipal context the legal issues that we have to be sensitive to. So I see no reason why we can't figure it out."

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