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Evanston at war over church signs

By Robert Enstad

In the scale of things, the threat of nuclear war is a weightier issue than the size of signs permitted on Evanston lawns. But a law is a law, and some Evanston residents are urging the city council to order antinuclear signs removed from in front of churches and homes because some are 9 square feet larger than the city ordinance allows.

The city council has put off a decision on the matter, and Evanston is having a war between antinuclear activists and antisign people, who don't like the looks of the signs and may not like the message.

On a fall morning more than two years ago, the congregation of the Wheadon United Methodist Church, 2214 Ridge Ave., stood on the front lawn and dedicated a "Nuclear Weapon Free Zone." "In the name of God the Creator, . . . nuclear hell shall not be built, stored or launched from at least this place," they said.

Similar signs went up at churches, synagogues and some private residences in Evanston.

Some were vandalized or stolen, but the signs caused little controversy until one was erected at the Friends Evanston Meeting [the Quaker church], 1010 Greenleaf Ave. A neighbor didn't like the looks of it—and church members speculate that he didn't like the nuclear-freeze movement—and he complained to City Hall that it was a zoning violation.

The sign is too big and out of character for church or residential lawns in Evanston, said Robert Rudd, city director of housing and property services.

Church people had known that, but they said they didn't care what the law said. "When we talk about an issue of this magnitude, there has to be room in the law for expansion," said Rev. Gregg Dell, pastor of the Wheadon Church.

Rev. Dell said the issue is relative, given the nuclear threat's seriousness. "If they want us to reduce the size of the sign, let them reduce the size of the threat," he said.

Rudd sent a memo to the city council's Planning and Development Committee, suggesting that it explore the issue "due to the sensitive nature of this subject and the controversy that may result when city-wide enforcement measures are undertaken."

Nuclear-freeze proponents showed up at a committee hearing last week to object to efforts to remove the signs, which stand as high as 8 feet and can be found mostly along Ridge Avenue.

Some of those favoring the signs argued that they were a statement of faith and could be considered a church bulletin. Committee members were not impressed by that argument. Besides, Rudd said, church bulletin signs couldn't exceed 12 square feet. Some of the nuclear signs are more than 21 square feet.

The committee has put the issue aside temporarily, and the nuclear signs remain. Evanston is developing a new sign ordinance, and committee members agreed that when they consider the new ordinance, they will address the issue of signs that make political statements.

Rev. Dell was optimistic. "I'm sure we are going to be able to keep the signs," he said. "It is only a question of how much trouble we will have keeping them. I'm sure the congregation is committed to keeping them."

Henry Warren, a financial analyst who belongs to the Wheadon Church and developed the first sign, said that if antinuclear signs are illegal, what about candidates' signs that also may violate the Evanston code? "When we brought that up the other night, one of the aldermen said, 'Oops, there goes my campaign,'" according to Warren.