

EC council marries church and state on Channel 24

By Miriam Raftery
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The El Cajon City Council has removed questionable videos from Channel 24, a taxpayer-funded government access channel.

The Wallbuilders' videos were pulled in response to a complaint filed by Raymond Lutz, who alleged that programs promoted Christianity and history from a Republican perspective.

Wallbuilders, an organization founded by evangelical David Barton, produced the videos. Barton is vice chair of the Texas Republican Party and a colleague of disgraced former House of Representatives leader Tom DeLay.

The city denied Lutz's written request, however, to provide equal time for alternative views by airing "The Big Buy: Tom DeLay's Stolen Congress." Lutz has testified before Council to again request equal time, as well as logs showing how often the videos were aired.

The goals of Wallbuilders include "educating the nation concerned with the Godly foundation of our country" and providing information to public officials as they "develop public policies which reflect Biblical values."

The company Web site describe the videos as "historical" program dedicated to "presenting America's forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on our moral, religious, and constitutional heritage."

"I find it amazing that this city is airing a program to train pastors and Christians," Lutz, president of the East County Democratic Club, told council members after discovering a video titled 'The Role of Pastors and Christians in Civil Government' on the city's government access TV station. "What about other religions? Why should this be paid for by the City?"

Other programming included 'American History in Black and White', a video which portrays Democrats as opposing integration in the 1950s, while presenting Republicans in a favorable light with respect to civil rights.

"This is an outrage," Lutz said. He noted that in recent years, the Democratic Party has been supportive of minority rights while Republicans have opposed measures such as integration and minority voting rights.

The El Cajon Council authorized payment of \$4,800 a year for the videos, which retail for \$19.95 each. The videos aired for nearly four years, and the council failed to produce logs of when and how often they aired, which violates the council's own policy. The council agreed to remove the Wallbuilder videos.

"I did view this as a problem, and that's why they are not on there anymore," said Kathi Henry, El Cajon city manager.

The videos also violated the council's policy against airing materials that promote religious beliefs, Henry said.

Lutz's request to air videos with an alternative political viewpoint were denied “just because they were political in general,” she said. Henry also said she does not see a need to present balance, to the Barton films that aired.

In May 2002, Councilman Bob McClellan introduced a motion asking then City Attorney [actually City Manager] William Garrett to draft a policy for programming on the city's government access channel. In Nov. 2003, the council approved additional broadcasts of the videos, but it is unclear how long they had run prior to that.

Garrett is currently a member of the Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District Board of Governors.

“My recommendation was for the city council to 'consider if they wished to air the videos,’” said Garrett, who noted that [he] had “concerns” about the videos and advised that appropriations would need to be made for the cost. “It was never my recommendation that they do so.”

Despite potential liability for lawsuits, the question of the historical value of the videos, and budget concerns, the council approved \$2,800 by a vote of 4-1 to be spent from the General Fund Reserve for additional broadcasts. The cost of airing the videos was approximately \$400 per month, or \$4,800 per year.

Councilman Dick Ramos opposed the broadcasts and said at the meeting he supported the separation of church and state.

Mayor Mark Lewis and council members Gary Kendrick, Charles Santos, and McClellan approved the motion. Mayor Mark Lewis and Kendrick, who are up for re-election Nov. 7, did not return calls for comment.

McClellan defended the videos as historical.

“We are doing a service for our people to re-educate them on the true history of America,” he said. McClellan said he is aware that Barton, a man who has publicly stated that he is dedicated to tearing down walls separating church and state, founded Wallbuilders and acknowledged Barton's ties to the Texas Republican Party.

Listed by Time magazine among the 25 most influential evangelicals, Barton was hired by the Republican National Committee as a political consultant. A close ally of the Bush administration, he was paid \$20,000 by the RNC for election-related spending during the 2004 presidential election.

Barton also traveled the country and told pastors that they could endorse political candidates from the pulpit, a violation of IRS rules.

Barton argued in his book *The Myth of Separation*, that America's founding fathers never intended separation of church and state.

Barton also published a 1996 handbook called *Impeachment: Restraining an Overactive Judiciary* timed to boost Tom DeLay's legislative effort to authorize Congress to impeach judges, according to an April 2005 article in *The Nation*.

McClellan supports Barton's views on the separation of church and state.

“I believe that also,” McClellan said. “It's not in the constitution. It's not in the Declaration of Independence. It's in a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote... His letter stated that congress would never establish domination in the United States, but Christian principles were free to circulate forever.”

Barton spoke in 2002 at a Worldview Weekend to activists seeking “Christian Dominion” in America, along with DeLay. According to Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a religious liberties watchdog group, Barton “followed DeLay” and “was responsible for bringing the majority whip to the event.”

Wallbuilders' founder has also been linked to groups with racist and anti-Semitic views, The Nation magazine reported.

He has spoken at a retreat sponsored by Scriptures for America, an organization that has been linked to neo-Nazi groups, spread anti-Semitic and racist literature, and distributed a booklet called *Death Penalty for Homosexuals*.

Besides denying Lutz's request to air *The Big Buy*, a film about corruption involving Delay, the City also turned down Lutz's request to broadcast information on East County Democratic Club meetings. City policy gives priority for broadcast of council meetings and city-sponsored events, but does allow broadcast for civic events sponsored by outside organizations.

Wallbuilders and Barton did not return phone calls requesting comment for this article.

David Blaire Loy with the American Civil Liberties Union in San Diego commended the City for responding to citizen concerns by taking down the videos.

But he expressed concerns over McClellan's statements.

“We are very concerned with civil liberties and particularly religious freedom,” the ACLU spokesman said. “To the extent that any member of government is expressing opinions that may endanger protection of religious freedom as embodied in the establishment clause of the First Amendment, that's troubling to us.”

“The Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and also freedom of religion,” he said. “Part of that is protecting religious freedom by keeping government out of the business of religion... We would be troubled when any branch of government is potentially involved in infringing Constitutional freedoms.”