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Atheist group wants memorial crosses removed

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A lawsuit filed by the American Atheists in U.S. District Court on Thursday seeks to remove steel crosses that dot roadways throughout Utah and memorialize Utah Highway Patrol troopers who have died in the line of duty.

The suit has drawn harsh reaction from family members of the fallen troopers and promises to be the source of an emotional battle.

The crosses, which stand about 12 feet high and bear the trooper's name and the UHP insignia, were erected starting in 1998 and serve as a memorial for 14 troopers who have died since 1931. About nine of the crosses are on public land and all of them are placed near the spot where the troopers lost their lives.

Plaintiffs Stephen Clark, Michael Rivers and Richard Andrews in conjunction with the American Atheists Inc. also seek to have the UHP symbol removed from the crosses.

"The presence of the UHP logo on a poignant religious symbol is an unconstitutional violation of the United States Constitution. It is government endorsement of religion," said Rivers, Utah director for American Atheists.

The suit names Col. Scott Duncan, superintendent of the UHP; John Njord, executive director of the Utah Department of Transportation; D'Arcy Dixon Pignanelli, executive director of the Department of Administrative Services; and F. Keith Stepan, director of the Division of Facilities Construction and Management Department of Administrative Services.

Rivers said the purpose of the suit is to eliminate religious symbols used by government agencies and placed on government land. American Atheists claim to have a membership of 30 million people. They are not opposed to memorials, just the crosses.

"We feel the department of transportation, by allowing the Utah Highway Patrol Association to pick a religious symbol is unfair. We think it should be totally secular with no religious theme," Rivers said. "[The cross] is a Christian religious symbol. People will look at those and automatically assume that religion is a part of it."

But the Utah Highway Patrol Association, a nonprofit, private organization, doesn't see it that way.

"The crosses are used as an international sign of memorial similar to those in Arlington National Cemetery," said Sgt. Todd Royce, who served as the association's president in 2002. "As a trooper, it makes me feel bad that it's even an issue. I know a couple of these troopers that have fallen and it's personal to us. We would hope the memorial of these troopers wouldn't be tarnished by any means."

The idea for the crosses came from *Salt Lake Tribune* columnist Robert Kirby,

who is a former police officer. Kirby took the idea to the association about 10 years ago and worked with Lt. Lee Perry to get the project off the ground.

Lori Lucas, whose father Tom Rettberg died while flying a UHP helicopter in February 2000, was not as delicate as Royce when she expressed her opinion about removal of the crosses.

"Without using extremely bad words, my family would be devastated," Lucas said. "It would be like disturbing and uprooting my father's coffin."

Rettberg's cross sits next to Interstate 15 in Layton. His widow Fran Rettberg, of Oceanside, Calif., has made it a ritual of visiting the cross each time she travels to Utah - about five times a year, Lucas said.

"It gives us a sense of pride for my father that he sacrificed his life for the community," she said.

Rodney Lund, whose son Dennis L. "Dee" Lund, was shot in the head while pursuing a suspect in a gas-theft along Interstate 70 west of Green River in June 1993, was equally appalled at the lawsuit but said he didn't mind the idea of a different kind of memorial, as long as some kind of monument remained.

The 74-year-old Ogden man is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and said the cross is not used in his religion, but he accepts the symbol as a memorial for the troopers' deaths.

"I understand the meaning of it. My religion doesn't necessarily revere that. If they wanted to do something else, that would be fine, but I'd hate to see them take it down," he said.

Dave Tabish, a self-proclaimed God-fearing American, said the lawsuit was the final straw for his call to action.

"If we take God's law out of our society, what's it going to become?" he asked.

Tabish, who owns a Salt Lake City-based insurance agency, said the suit is just another example of the vocal minority pushing their agenda down the throats of the silent majority.

"We've taken God out of the schools, out of our council meetings and taken the Ten Commandments out of government," Tabish said. "It's time we stand up and put God back in our country."

Tabish plans to organize a march in support of the crosses and vows to picket the courthouse should proceedings begin.

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