

## **Piscataway Residents Urge Mayor, Council to Celebrate All Holidays** ***Local Leaders Concerned over Refusal to include Menorah, Kinara and other*** ***Holiday Symbols; file complaint with Anti-Defamation League***

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Piscataway, NJ -- In response to the refusal of Piscataway Mayor Brian Wahler and Council members to include symbols in addition to the Christmas Tree in the Township's official holiday display, residents have launched an on-line petition and issued the following statement:

"In Piscataway, New Jersey's 7th most diverse community, our elected officials should be welcoming an array of winter holiday symbols, including Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Diwali when it falls in the same season, and the Lunar New Year. Instead, they are hiding behind claims that they cannot legally display non-Christmas symbols. These officials will not budge, despite being provided legal rulings and countless examples of celebrations that include menorahs and kinaras by local communities, state government and even the White House," said Laura Leibowitz, Middlesex County Democratic Committeemember from Piscataway's Possumtown neighborhood.

The [online petition](#) being circulated by the Piscataway Progressive Democratic Organization, notes the remarks made by President Obama in 2011 at the White House Menorah lighting.

"The first chapter of the Hanukkah story was written 22 centuries ago, when rulers banned religious rituals and persecuted Jews who dared to observe their faith," President Barack Obama said. "Which is why today we are asked not only to light the menorah, but to proudly display it—to publicize the mitzvah."

President and First Lady Obama also issued annual Kwanzaa greetings from the White House. Many localities in New Jersey have begun to add Kwanzaa celebrations and Kinara lightings to their holiday celebrations. Bergen County will hold its first Kinara lighting on December 27.

Over the last few weeks, residents and members of the PPDO have repeatedly asked the Council to display other symbols. Staci Berger, PPDO president and Democratic Committee member from the Heights neighborhood, attempted to donate a small menorah for the Township to use. It was returned, unused, by Council President Frank Uhrin.

“This is especially disconcerting now, as hate crimes have increased dramatically in the last three years, especially anti-Semitic attacks, including the one in Jersey City on Dec. 12, 2019,” said Mindy Walsh, PPDO Treasurer. “ At this time in our country's history and in our community, Piscataway's elected officials -- all of whom are Democrats -- should be showing support for the Jewish people and celebrating the diverse beliefs of all our residents.”

Walsh also cited an anti-Muslim incident last June in Piscataway, when a Muslim-American leader was targeted in a political attack flyer by Democratic incumbents aligned with the Mayor. “This season of peace is an opportunity for town leaders to move forward, to publicly display unity and respect for all faiths and cultures.”

In written remarks presented at the December 17 Town Council meeting, Walsh also cited the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling of 1989 that a menorah, when displayed next to a Christmas tree, is a legitimate holiday symbol like the tree. The township consulting attorney, Raj Goomer, claimed that there is still substantial law that needs to be researched, despite being presented by Ms. Walsh and others with the SCOTUS ruling and examples of dozens of other nearby towns that include menorahs and kinaras in their holiday displays.

Berger expressed concern about Piscataway Mayor Brian Wahler's remarks at the end of the meeting, claiming that Piscataway is not like other towns, citing the town's recent nod in Money Magazine. “We are not sure why the Mayor thinks that being listed in Money Magazine has anything to do with celebrating an array of holiday symbols,” said Berger.

“It's true that we are far more diverse than most communities, but we are very far behind the times when it comes to being inclusive,” Berger added. “This is another example of Mayor Wahler and his cronies refusing to lead on issues that have widespread support. They could stand up for our whole community, but instead they are excluding people and being divisive. Piscataway residents deserve better.”

The full video of the Council meeting is available here:

<https://www.facebook.com/CentralJerseyProgressiveDemocrats/videos/562404591224137/>