



OTTAWA CITIZEN

Cullen demands review of atheist ad

By Jennifer Green, The Ottawa Citizen February 17, 2009 10:15 AM

OTTAWA — The chairman of Ottawa’s transit committee will demand that city staff explain why they refused to allow atheism ads on city buses, even though ads quoting the Bible have been approved by the city and could appear on buses at any time.

Councillor Alex Cullen said Monday that council had no opportunity to discuss the decision to reject the ads from an atheist organization — which is now considering legal advice.

The atheism ads, which say “There’s probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life,” began in Britain and have spread around the world. In Canada they’ve been on buses in London, Calgary, and Toronto, but were rejected by city staff in Halifax and Ottawa. Justin Trottier, president of the Freethought Association of Canada, the ads’ sponsor, said his group might ask a lawyer if their right to freedom of speech has been breached.

Mr. Cullen hopes it won’t get that far. “Presumably cooler heads will prevail.

“This is a free country. We have religious ads extolling family virtues, we have Salvation Army ads. Why wouldn’t we have these ads?” “We could certainly do with the money,” he sighed.

In 2007, OC Transpo approved ads for Bus Stop Bible Studies, a campaign on panels inside buses quoting scripture and asking life’s big questions. Roughly 2,400 ads have run in Calgary, Burlington and Toronto, but the sponsor has not yet raised enough money to place the ads on Ottawa buses.

Though the group hasn’t yet run the Bible-quoting ads in Ottawa, its founder is puzzled city staff’s rejection of the atheists’ ads.

“I don’t follow the logic,” said Bus Stop Bible Studies founder David Harrison. “Why would they approve ours and not theirs? If we don’t stand up for (the atheists’) rights, ours will be trampled too.”

Mr. Harrison hoped the atheist ads would pique enough Christian contrarians into contributing to his own campaign in Ottawa. “God might be disappointed or hurt,” he said of the atheist campaign, “but offended? I don’t think so.”

A recent example of the Bible Studies bus signs in Metro Toronto said, “God says, ‘I am.’ And He’s prepared to prove it!”

Mr. Harrison is a little dismayed at how much media attention the atheists have received, while he labours in obscurity. "It amazes me. We've had virtually no coverage at all." His organization got a small story when Mississauga refused their ads, because no religious advertising of any kind is allowed.

Usually churches sponsor the ad panels, which cost about \$45 for 12 weeks, a rate given for charitable organizations. To get the campaign in Ottawa, Mr. Harrison needs at least 50 panels.

In an e-mail, he said: "we have not seen any increase in donations or sponsorships as yet. In January, donations were at the same level as last year. Sometimes it can be frustrating that the atheists can raise \$43,000 in just a couple of weeks ... Nevertheless, if just 850 churches and/or individuals in Ottawa donated just \$45 we could place a Bus Stop Bible Studies in every bus in the city ..."

Mr. Cullen also wants city staff to explain why they nixed the atheism ads as offensive, but recently approved a Virgin radio ad campaign that showed baleful, pregnant teenage girls and warned parents to "lock up" their daughters because the "Gods of Rock" were in town.

The radio station is clearly hoping to get attention by shocking the public, said Mr. Cullen. He's heard from several constituents, and even got an earful from his 26-year-old daughter.

"I trotted out my line that we follow the standards of the Association of Canadian Advertisers. Of course we're going to give (the station) free ink (by publicizing the complaints), but one has to ask whether those standards did apply."

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