

# Smoky Mountain News



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## **‘In God We Trust’: Local governments asked to display national motto**

Written by [Jessi Stone](#)

Members of the U.S. Motto Action Committee have been making their way around the state asking county commissioners and town boards to display the national motto, “In God We Trust,” prominently on government buildings.

Since the committee is completely funding the projects through private donations, saying yes has been easy for many local governments. Close to 50 counties and town governments have already approved the request, and the committee still has hundreds more presentations to go.

“Displaying the motto gives ceremonial honor to public occasions and expresses confidence in our society,” said Rick Lanier, vice chairman of the committee. He also assures local governments that the committee’s request stands on solid legal ground as the issue of displaying the motto has case law to back it up. “This effort is legal and there is nothing to challenge.”

Swain County commissioners most recently approved displaying the national motto outside of the county administrative building as well as inside both courtrooms of the building.

Macon County commissioners were asked to consider displaying the motto somewhere on the courthouse, but commissioners asked their attorney to look into possible legal ramifications before voting on the matter in October.

Lanier said the committee hasn’t given a presentation to Haywood County because he was told commissioners already have the motto displayed in their meeting chambers.

Lanier said the committee asked to give a presentation to the Jackson County commissioners but was told the commissioners weren’t interested at this time. Other counties that have approved displaying the motto on government property include Cherokee, Graham, Yancey and Rutherford.

## Legal challenge

Lanier served as a county commissioner in Davidson County from 1998-2002. On the first anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he asked his board to consider displaying “In God We Trust” on the county building. Commissioners approved it, but it was quickly met with a federal lawsuit filed by local attorneys who were backed up by the American Civil Liberties Union.

“We formed the committee in December 2002 with the original intent of defending the motto staying on the Davidson center,” Lanier said.

The federal lawsuit was filed in early 2003 and drug out in courts through December 2005. Davidson County won in federal District Court in Greensboro and also won in the Court of Appeals. The case was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court but was referred back to the appellate court.

Lanier said the appellate court ruled that “In God We Trust” is officially the national motto and can be found hanging above the Speaker’s seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, in the U.S. Senate and on the money issued by the U.S. Treasury.

“The motto is referenced on several monuments and buildings in Washington, D.C., and across the country,” Lanier said. “Now the ruling is case law and we haven’t been challenged since then.”

The committee then shifted its focus to encouraging local governments to display the motto but didn’t have much response at first. Lanier said the effort was tabled for a while and then ramped back up late last year with much better success.

“I feel the political and spiritual climate of the country have a lot to do with our reasoning for doing this now,” Lanier said. “And also the acceptance we’re getting from county and town hall leaders.”

## Bonding or isolating?

Swain County commissioner David Monteith is excited and proud that the board unanimously approved displaying the motto on the county building. While he is sure someone will be offended by it at some point, he isn’t too concerned about it.

“People are always going to be offended by something,” he said. “To me as a Christian and as an American, I 100 percent support that — I think we need to be more vocal in how we believe.”

Macon County commissioners also seemed amenable to approving it once it was cleared with their attorney.

Even though the courts didn’t agree with the complainant’s claim that displaying the motto violated the First Amendment, the ACLU still feels such an action is not a best practice for local governments.

“Government buildings should welcome all members of the community equally, not just those who share the majority religious view,” said Mike Meno, communications director for the ACLU of North Carolina. “People who practice a different religion, or no religion at all, should not be made to feel like outsiders when they enter their local courthouse or government office.”

Lanier doesn’t agree. In his opinion, the federal government adopted the national motto officially in 1956 and had reaffirmed it several times throughout the years. “People certainly have the right to take issue with that and try to get it reversed or changed, but right now it’s still the national motto,” he said.

He said the First Amendment gives everyone the freedom of speech whether they agree with the speech or not.

“Some would say this may offend them — I’ve had individuals express that to me — and my response was we apparently have evolved into a society where folks feel they have a right not to be offended,” he said. “I’m offended sometimes ... I may not agree with another individual but I honor and respect their rights and expect them to do the same for me.”

Brian McMahan, Jackson County Commission chairman, said he and the board had different reasons for not wanting to display the motto on the county building. At this time, the Jackson County administrative building does not display any federal, state or local mottos or emblems on the exterior walls.

“The building just has the name of the building and at this point there’s no initiative on the board’s part to place a motto on the building,” McMahan said. “We have been working to hang some artwork and historical documents in our board room.”

When that project starts to come together, McMahan said he would not be against hanging some kind of formatted display of the federal seal and motto in the boardroom.

#### Paying for the projects

Lanier said the committee raises the funds needed to display the motto on as many locations as the local governments request. Once the government body figures out what they want to approve, committee members work to raise the funds from local businesses, churches and individuals in the community.

In many cases, Lanier said he receives financial support just by giving the presentation in each county. After one presentation, he had a man offer to fund the entire project if commissioners approved it. Another person offered to lead the fundraising efforts in the community.

The cost depends on the specific request from a county or town government.

“Some counties decide to put it in their chambers and some decide to put it on the exterior of a government center or courthouse,” Lanier said. “We don’t limit the amount of locations they want to put it.”

Caldwell County approved displaying the motto in four locations, which will cost about \$5,000. Swain County approved three locations, which is estimated to cost more than \$2,500.

Lanier said it could take several months to complete one project due to the time it takes to figure out the specifics of what the government wants, order the letters and get it installed.

“Due to fast growth we’ve had — especially in the western part of the state — it’s slowed us down some,” he said.

#### U.S. national motto facts

- “In God We Trust” was adopted as the official national motto in 1956 by a resolution signed by President Dwight Eisenhower. This was just a couple of years after he also pushed to have “Under God” added to the Pledge of Allegiance.
- According to the U.S. Treasury website, the motto began being placed on coins in 1864 because of the increased religious sentiment during the Civil War.
- Religious and secular groups have long debated the appropriateness and constitutionality of having an official motto mentioning “God” considering the founding fathers’ dedication to maintaining the separation of church and state.
- In 2002 and in 2011, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to reaffirm the national motto. The resolution also encourages the public to display the motto on all public buildings, including schools and government institutions.