

Thou shalt not mess with Farmin Park's graven image

Lindsey Treffry/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

A Ten Commandments display in Sandpoint's Farmin Park is creating a stir - but not in Sandpoint. A letter sent in November all the way from the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison, Wis., recommended the city remove the 42-year-old monument from public land, and the Sandpoint City Council last week started gathering public opinion over what to do.

The overwhelming response - keep it.

Whether the opinions are religious based, or parkgoers just fancy seeing it there, it's obvious Sandpoint intends to protect the monolith.

Some dissenters, who are few, argue the monument should be moved to private property, saying the town is welcome to all viewpoints, and isn't there supposed to be a separation of church and state?

Some contend no one is forced to look at the thing, so let it be. Move on.

This isn't the first time a Ten Commandments monument on public property has been challenged, though. Almost 10 years ago, an Austin, Texas, Ten Commandments display donated in 1961 by the Fraternal Order of Eagles - the same group that donated to Sandpoint 11 years later - was said to be in violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." In *Van Orden v. Perry*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled the displays were constitutional, on the grounds the monument conveyed both religious and secular messages. Appealed to the Supreme Court, the display was again ruled constitutional by a vote of 5 to 4.

A local Liberty Institute member argues the Sandpoint City Council should plan on keeping the monument where it's placed. It's been there for 40 years without controversy, and when combined with other commemorative items, the statue adds to the historic context of the park.

Sandpoint City Council should beware, though. For even if a majority of Sandpoint residents would not appreciate a 6-foot-tall stone monument featuring verses from the Muslim Quran, it would be in the best interest of the city, if such were donated to the park, to plant it there. If they allow this Judeo-Christian monument, they had better be prepared to allow all religious - or atheist - monuments.