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Forks Township supervisors void contract with Hope Wesleyan Church

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By **EDWARD SIEGER**

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FORKS TWP. | Township supervisors agreed Thursday to void a yearlong contract with Hope Wesleyan Church that gave the church permission to use a large portion of the community center for Sunday worship services.

Following a lengthy debate over the separation of church and state, Supervisors C. David Howell, Bonnie Nicholas and Erik Chuss voted to void the agreement. They said Don Miller, the community center manager, was not authorized to enter such a substantial contract without consulting anyone.

Township Solicitor Karl Kline said an agreement between the township and Hope Wesleyan included a basic room reservation form that anyone would use. The agreement gave the church access to a gymnasium and five rooms from 7 a.m. to noon for a year for \$700 a week.

When the church held a service Sunday, the fitness room and the number two and three gyms were the only rooms not in use, Kline said. The agreement also called for a storage room to become a permanent office for a pastor, including the installation of a fax and phone line and Internet service, he said, adding that the agreement has since been suspended.

Kline said the church's Web site gave the community center as its address and listed events scheduled for 2 p.m. in the community center and laser tag in the township park in the evening.

He advised supervisors last month and Thursday that the agreement violates the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of a separation of church and state.

Miller, who voted against voiding the contract, said he wouldn't call the agreement with the church a contract, just a room reservation. He claimed other municipalities allow churches to use their community centers and public buildings.

Miller said he was just trying to bring in revenue.

This isn't about the separation of church and state, Nicholas said. The real issue is whether Miller or any township employee can rent such a significant portion of the community center for an entire year, she said.

"No one can go into an agreement with anyone for a year," Nicholas said. "This will not allow people to use those parts of the community center for a year."

Chuss expressed concern about allowing a church to use the community center for worship which constitutes "an explicit support of a particular religion" and opens a Pandora's Box for any church to request equal space.

Howell, the board chairman, said he didn't understand how a supervisor could negotiate a contract of this size in July without other supervisors becoming aware until there appeared to be a potential scheduling conflict. Miller had no authority to enter into such a contract, he said.

Supervisor Robert Egolf, who also voted against voiding the agreement, said allowing the church to use the building did not violate the Constitution.

"I just don't get it," he said.

If fellow supervisors believe they have a "miscreant employee who needs to be punished" then they should discuss the issue behind closed doors, Egolf said.

"Don Miller is not on trial here," he said.

A handful of residents spoke in favor of voiding the contract over concerns about separation of church and state.

Nicholas, who chairs the administration and finance committee, said the committee will discuss community center use policies at its Dec. 9 meeting and bring recommendations to the full board Dec. 17.

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