



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on June 13, 2017

Michigan Man Banned From Farmers' Market for Refusing Same-sex Weddings on His Farm

A farmer is suing the city of East Lansing,  Michigan, for banning him from its farmers' market because he refuses to host same-sex weddings on his farm far outside the city.

Steve Tennes, owner of Country Mill Farms in Charlotte, Michigan, a small town 22 miles southwest of East Lansing, filed a [lawsuit](#) in U.S. District Court on May 31 challenging East Lansing's decision to bar him from its farmers' market, where he has sold produce every year since 2010. Tennes argues that the city is targeting him for his religious beliefs in violation of both the U.S. Constitution and Michigan law.

In 2014, Tennes, a Roman Catholic, politely declined a request by two women to hold their marriage ceremony on his farm, which has hosted weddings for many years. Tennes referred the women to another farm, which granted their request. One of the women later publicized the disagreement on Facebook but took no legal action.

Last August, after explaining why his religious convictions prohibited him from permitting same-sex weddings on his property, Tennes announced on Facebook that he would no longer host weddings at Country Mill, saying that this action "allows us to maintain our personal religious beliefs." He added that "people of all background and beliefs are always welcomed" at his farm. In fact, according to Tennes' lawsuit, Country Mill "has employed people from a wide variety of racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds, including members of the LGBT community."

People of all backgrounds and beliefs are not, however, always welcomed in the "progressive" city of East Lansing, which asked Tennes not to come to the farmers' market the weekend after his announcement, allegedly for fear of protests. Tennes appeared anyway and continued to do so for the remainder of the 2016 season without incident.

In December, he announced on Facebook that after much consideration and a review of his policies, he would resume hosting weddings on his farm, with one caveat:

The Country Mill family and its staff have and will continue to participate in hosting the ceremonies held at our orchard. It remains our deeply held religious belief that marriage is the union of one man and one woman and Country Mill has the First Amendment right to express and act upon its beliefs. For this reason, Country Mill reserves the right to deny a request for services that would require it to communicate, engage in, or host expression that violates the owners' sincerely held religious beliefs and conscience.

This proved to be too much for the "tolerant" leftists in East Lansing to stomach, and so, the complaint alleges, the city "started work to ban Country Mill by city policy." It did so by extending its Human Relations Ordinance to farmers' market vendors' "general business practice[s]," meaning that a vendor who adhered to the city's expansive nondiscrimination law at the farmers' market but failed to do so at other locations — even those outside the jurisdiction of East Lansing — would no longer be permitted to do business at the market.

According to the complaint, the city failed to invite Country Mill to apply for a stall at the farmers' market in 2017 as it had for the previous six years, and when Country Mill applied through the non-



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invitational process, “the city pulled Country Mill’s application from the normal review process and reviewed it separately, something it did not do for other vendor applications.” Finally, the city denied Country Mill’s application.

“In doing so,” the lawsuit claims, “the city indicated (1) that Tennes’ Facebook post stating his religious beliefs violated the city’s new policy, (2) Country Mill was prohibited from the market for that violation, and (3) if the city ‘misinterpreted or misunderstood’ Tennes’ statement — i.e., if Tennes changed his religious beliefs and expression of those beliefs — then the city would reconsider his application.”

“Our faith and beliefs on marriage and hosting weddings at our home and in our backyard of our farm have nothing to do with the city of East Lansing,” Tennes said at a press conference announcing his lawsuit. “Nor does it have anything to do with the produce that we sell to the people that attend the farmers’ markets who are from all backgrounds and all beliefs.”

East Lansing Mayor Mark Meadows disagreed emphatically. According to the [Lansing State Journal](#), Meadows “said the city’s ordinance applies to Tennes not because of his individual beliefs or Facebook posts, but because of his ‘business decision’ to exclude same-sex couples from holding wedding ceremonies at the farm.”

“This is about them operating a business that discriminates against LGBT individuals and that’s a whole different issue,” Meadows said.

Tennes’ lawsuit argues that East Lansing’s action violates both the First and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution because it “conditions Plaintiffs’ participation in a public benefit — i.e., the Farmer’s Market — on the surrender of Plaintiffs’ constitutional rights to free speech, free press, free exercise of religion, and equal protection under the law.” It further maintains that the action violates Michigan law by extending a city ordinance and policy to activities occurring outside East Lansing. The city’s Human Relations Commission has publicly stated on its website and in printed materials that the Human Relations Ordinance applies only to “incident[s] ... within the city’s boundaries,” notes the complaint.

The Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a religious-freedom advocacy group, is serving as Tennes’ counsel in his lawsuit. ADF lead counsel Kate Anderson told the *Lansing State Journal* that East Lansing’s policy specifically targeted Tennes for his religious beliefs. “What [Tennes] did was not illegal,” Anderson said. “They are running their farm according to their beliefs, which is the right of every American. What is wrong here is the city of East Lansing targeting them and trying to discriminate against them for acting upon their beliefs and for believing.”

In a sane world, Tennes would score a walkaway victory in court; then again, in a sane world, he would never have to go to court in the first place. But whether he wins or loses, Christians and others who dissent from the “progressive” religion — whatever its tenets happen to be on any given day — had better be girding themselves for more such battles in the future. As a religious-liberty lawyer told the *American Conservative’s* [Rod Dreher](#), “There is no looming resolution to these conflicts; no plateau that we’re about to reach. Only intensification. It’s a train that won’t stop so long as there is momentum and track.” And Americans’ liberties, religious and otherwise, are tied to the track.

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