



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on December 10, 2010

Planned Noah's Ark Theme Park in Kentucky Draws Praise, Criticism

A planned \$150 million theme park in northern Kentucky, to be called the "Ark Encounter," is prompting cheers from Bible-believing Christians and gasps of alarm from secularists who fear the attraction may cross the supposed line of "separation between church and state."

The park, which will center around the biblical account of Noah's Ark in Genesis 6-9, is a joint venture between [Answers in Genesis](#), a Kentucky-based organization that helps Christians defend their faith in the public forum, and a private group called Ark Encounter LLC. The park will be privately funded and is expected to employ some 900 people.



In 2007 Answers in Genesis opened a \$27 million [Creation Museum](#), which educates visitors on the biblical creation account — and which has been the focus of much criticism from the secular scientific community. Nonetheless, the museum has hosted over one million visitors since it opened, and founder Ken Ham anticipated similar success with the new venture.

"Based on our experience and success operating the large, state-of-the-art Creation Museum," Ham said in a prepared statement, "our board believes the time is right to partner with the Ark Encounter in building a full-scale Noah's Ark. We hope that this fun and educational complex ... will become another popular tourist destination for the state."

In addition to the full-size interactive Ark display, the park will feature shows with live animals, a replica of the biblical Tower of Babel, a 500-seat special effects theater, and a re-creation of a first-century Middle Eastern village.

The project's developers said they anticipate the park will attract over 1.5 million visitors in the first year.

Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear added his enthusiasm to the excitement surrounding the anticipated local attraction. "We are excited to join with the Ark Encounter group as it seeks to provide this unique, family friendly tourist attraction to the Commonwealth," the governor said. "Bringing new jobs to Kentucky is my top priority, and with the estimated 900 jobs this project will create, I am happy about the economic impact this project will have on the Northern Kentucky region."

Developers said that most of the construction and development costs will be paid for by raising about \$125 million, with Answers in Genesis kicking in an additional \$24.5 million for the Ark replica.

Not everyone was joining in the chorus of praise for the new attraction, however, with some critics wondering if the estimated \$37.5 million the developers are expecting to receive in state tax incentives



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will cross the line between private faith and government neutrality.

Don Byrd of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, a group that religiously guards the supposed wall of separation between church and state, sympathized with the governor's economic motives, noting, "In this economy, it's understandable why states are doing whatever they can to invite job-creating opportunities." Nonetheless, warned the Byrd, "using tax dollars for the purpose of promoting the religious content of the park — or with any manner of preferential treatment — would be a mistake."

Byrd quoted noted constitutional scholar Erwin Chemerinsky, who weighed in on the issue, "If this is about bringing the Bible to life, and it's the Bible's account of history that they're presenting, then the government is paying for the advancement of religion. And the Supreme Court has said that the government can't advance religion."

In addition to concerns over the constitutionality of helping a Bible-based theme park with public tax money, editors for the Lexington *Herald-Leader*, Kentucky's second-largest newspaper, wrung their hands over worries that the governor's support of the park would create an image problem for the state. "Anyone who wants to believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible has that right," said an editorial in the paper. "However, the way the Beshear administration handled this makes it appear Kentucky either embraces such thinking or is desperate to take advantage of those who do."

And Daniel Phelps of the Kentucky Paleontological Society worried that the government's connection to the park would make the state unappealing to educated people. "I don't envision people, especially those with science backgrounds, wanting to move to a state where the 'ark park' has government support," Phelps projected.

Nonetheless, Governor Beshear remained confident that the Ark Encounter would go through without any major obstacles. "The law doesn't allow us to discriminate the subject matter of theme parks as long as it's legal and in good taste," he said, adding, "There's nothing that's even remotely unconstitutional about a for-profit organization coming in and investing \$150 million to create jobs in Kentucky and bring tourism to Kentucky."



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