



U.S. Department of Justice

Civil Rights Division

Office of the Assistant Attorney General

Washington, D.C. 20530

December 15, 2016

Re: The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act

Dear State, County, and Municipal Officials:

I am writing to you today to highlight the obligation of public officials to comply with the various provisions of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), and to inform you about documents previously issued by the Department of Justice (Department) that may be of assistance to you in understanding and applying this important Federal civil rights law.

The freedom to practice religion according to the dictates of one's conscience is among our most fundamental rights, written into our Constitution and protected by our laws. In our increasingly diverse nation, the Department continues to steadfastly defend this basic freedom and ensure that all people may live according to their beliefs, free of discrimination, harassment, or persecution.

Over the years Congress has passed a number of laws that protect the religious liberties of those who live in America, including the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1996 Church Arson Prevention Act. In 2000 Congress, by unanimous consent, and with the support of a broad range of civil rights and religious organizations, enacted the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc et seq. In enacting RLUIPA, Congress determined that there was a need for Federal legislation to protect religious individuals and institutions from unduly burdensome, unreasonable or discriminatory zoning, landmarking, and other land use regulations.<sup>1</sup> Congress heard testimony that houses of worship, particularly those of minority religions and start-up churches, were disproportionately affected, and in fact often were actively discriminated against, by local land use decisions. Congress also found that, as a whole, religious institutions were treated worse than secular places of assembly like community centers, fraternal organizations, and movie theaters, and that zoning authorities frequently violated the United States Constitution by placing excessive burdens on the ability of congregations to exercise their faiths.

---

<sup>1</sup> RLUIPA also contains provisions that prohibit regulations that impose a "substantial burden" on the religious exercise of persons residing or confined in an "institution," unless the government can show that the regulation serves a "compelling government interest" and is the least restrictive way for the government to further that interest. 42 U.S.C § 2000cc-1.

RLUIPA includes a private right of action, which allows private individuals to enforce its provisions. Congress also gave the U.S. Attorney General the authority to enforce RLUIPA, and the Department of Justice has been active in enforcing this important civil rights law since its enactment. To date, the Department has opened nearly 100 formal investigations and filed nearly 20 lawsuits related to RLUIPA's land use provisions.<sup>2</sup> Through these efforts, as well as those by private parties, RLUIPA has helped secure the ability of thousands of individuals and institutions to practice their faiths freely and without discrimination.

Yet, sixteen years after RLUIPA's enactment, far too many people and communities remain unaware of the law, or do not fully understand the scope of its provisions. Earlier this year, the Department's Civil Rights Division launched *Combating Religious Discrimination Today*, an initiative bringing together community leaders around the country to discuss challenges regarding religious discrimination, religion-based hate crimes, and religious freedom, and to discuss possible solutions. One of the issues raised repeatedly from participants was that municipal, county, and other state and local officials are insufficiently familiar with the land use provisions of RLUIPA and their obligations under this Federal civil rights law. Participants also reported that houses of worship, particularly those from less familiar religious traditions, often face unlawful barriers in the zoning and building process. Additionally, participants explained that, in their experience, litigation frequently was avoided when the communities informed local officials of their obligations under RLUIPA early in the process. Participants recommended that the Department take proactive measures to ensure that state and local officials are properly educated about RLUIPA's land use provisions.<sup>3</sup>

In light of this, we are sending this letter to you and other officials throughout the country to remind you about the key provisions of RLUIPA. Ensuring that our constitutional protections of religious freedom are protected requires that Federal, state, and local officials work together, and to that end, we encourage you to share this letter with your colleagues. We hope that you will continue to work with the Department of Justice going forward and view us as a partner and ally in ensuring that no individuals in this country suffer discrimination or unlawful treatment simply because of their faiths.

---

<sup>2</sup> This work is detailed in reports on enforcement issued in September 2010 (available at [https://www.justice.gov/crt/rluipa\\_report\\_092210.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/crt/rluipa_report_092210.pdf)) and July 2016 (available at <https://www.justice.gov/crt/file/877931/download>).

<sup>3</sup> The *Combating Religious Discrimination Today* report is available at [https://www.justice.gov/Combating\\_Religious\\_Discrimination](https://www.justice.gov/Combating_Religious_Discrimination).

## 1. RLUIPA provides broad protections for religious individuals and institutions.

RLUIPA's land use provisions provide a number of protections for places of worship, faith-based social service providers and religious schools, and individuals using land for religious purposes. Specifically, RLUIPA provides for:

- *Protection against substantial burdens on religious exercise:* Section 2(a) of RLUIPA prohibits the implementation of any land use regulation that imposes a “substantial burden” on the religious exercise of a person or institution except where justified by a “compelling government interest” that the government pursues using the least restrictive means.<sup>4</sup>
- *Protection against unequal treatment for religious assemblies and institutions:* Section 2(b)(1) of RLUIPA provides that religious assemblies and institutions must be treated at least as well as nonreligious assemblies and institutions.
- *Protection against religious or denominational discrimination:* Section 2(b)(2) of RLUIPA prohibits discrimination “against any assembly or institution on the basis of religion or religious denomination.”
- *Protection against total exclusion of religious assemblies:* Section 2(b)(3)(A) of RLUIPA provides that government must not totally exclude religious assemblies from a jurisdiction.
- *Protection against unreasonable limitation of religious assemblies:* Section 2(b)(3)(B) of RLUIPA provides that government must not unreasonably limit “religious assemblies, institutions, or structures within a jurisdiction.”

While the majority of RLUIPA cases involve places of worship such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, the law is written broadly to cover a wide range of religious uses. The “substantial burden” provision in Section 2(a) of the statute applies to burdens on “a person, including a religious assembly or institution.” The remaining provisions apply to any religious “assembly or institution.” Thus, RLUIPA applies widely not only to diverse places of worship, but also to religious schools, religious camps, religious retreat centers, and religious social service facilities such as group homes, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens, as well as to individuals exercising their religion through use of property, such as home prayer gatherings or Bible studies.

To be clear, RLUIPA does not provide a blanket exemption from local zoning or landmarking laws. Rather, it contains a number of safeguards to prevent discriminatory, unreasonable, or unjustifiably burdensome regulations from hindering religious exercise. Ordinarily, before seeking recourse from RLUIPA, those seeking approval for a religious land

---

<sup>4</sup> Section 2 of RLUIPA is codified at 42 U.S.C § 2000cc.

use will have to apply for permits or zoning relief according to the regular procedures set forth in the applicable ordinances, unless doing so would be futile, or the regular procedures are discriminatory or create an unjustifiable burden. While zoning is primarily a local matter, where it conflicts with Federal civil rights laws such as the Fair Housing Act or RLUIPA, Federal law takes precedence.

Each of the aforementioned protections in RLUIPA are discussed in greater detail below.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. RLUIPA protects against unjustified burdens on religious exercise.**

Land use regulations frequently can impede the ability of religious institutions to carry out their mission of serving the religious needs of their members. Section 2(a) of RLUIPA bars imposition of land use regulations that create a “substantial burden” on the religious exercise of a person or institution, unless the government can show that it has a “compelling interest” for imposing the regulation and that the regulation is the least restrictive way for the government to further that interest. A mere inconvenience to the person or religious institution is not sufficient, but a burden that is substantial may violate RLUIPA. For example, in a case in which the United States filed a friend-of-the-court brief in support of a Maryland church’s challenge to a rezoning denial, a Federal appeals court ruled that the church had “presented considerable evidence that its current facilities inadequately serve its needs,” and that the “delay, uncertainty and expense” in looking for a different property may create a substantial burden on the church’s religious exercise in violation of RLUIPA.<sup>6</sup> The court relied on facts including that the church had to hold multiple services, turn away worshipers, and curtail a number of important activities at its current location, and that it had a reasonable expectation that it could develop its new property. Similarly, the Department of Justice filed suit in a California Federal district court alleging that a city’s denial of zoning approval for a mosque to take down the aging and inadequate structures in which it had been worshipping and construct a new facility imposed a substantial burden on the congregation.<sup>7</sup> The mosque, which was grandfathered for its current use, consisted of a group of repurposed buildings for its various activities and a large tent for overflow from the prayer hall. However, the city prohibited the mosque from replacing the buildings and tent with a single building. The case was resolved by a consent decree in Federal court.

If imposition of a zoning or landmarking law creates a substantial burden on religious exercise, such imposition is invalid unless it is supported by a compelling governmental interest pursued through the least restrictive means. RLUIPA does not define “compelling interest,” but

---

<sup>5</sup> Further information may be found in the *Statement of the Department of Justice on Land Use Provisions of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act* (available at [https://www.justice.gov/crt/rluipa\\_q\\_a\\_9-22-10.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/crt/rluipa_q_a_9-22-10.pdf)), and at the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division RLUIPA information page (<https://www.justice.gov/crt/religious-land-use-and-institutionalized-persons-act>).

<sup>6</sup> *Bethel World Outreach v. Montgomery Cnty. Council*, 706 F.3d 548, 557-558 (4th Cir. 2013).

<sup>7</sup> *United States v. Lomita*, No. 2:13-CV-00707 (E.D. Cal. filed March 3, 2013).

the U.S. Supreme Court has previously explained that compelling interests are “interests of the highest order.”<sup>8</sup>

### **3. RLUIPA protects equal access for religious institutions and assemblies.**

Section 2(b)(1) of RLUIPA – known as the “equal terms” provision – mandates that religious assemblies and institutions be treated at least as well as nonreligious assemblies and institutions. For example, a Federal appeals court ruled that zoning restrictions that a city applied to places of worship but not to lodges, union halls, nightclubs, and other assemblies, violated the equal terms provision.<sup>9</sup> This included a requirement that places of worship, but not other assembly uses, obtain the permission of 60% of neighbors in a 1,300-foot radius. The Department of Justice filed a friend-of-the-court brief arguing that the distinction violated RLUIPA. Similarly, the Department brought suit under RLUIPA’s equal terms provision against a town in Illinois that permitted clubs, lodges, meeting halls, and theaters in its business districts, but excluded places of worship.<sup>10</sup> The case was prompted after the town served notice of violation on four small churches operating in locations where these nonreligious assembly uses were permitted. The case was resolved by consent decree.

### **4. RLUIPA protects against religious discrimination in land use.**

Section 2(b)(2) of RLUIPA bars discrimination “against any assembly or institution on the basis of religion or religious denomination.” Thus if an applicant is treated differently in a zoning or landmarking process because of the religion represented (e.g., Christian, Jewish, Muslim), or because of the particular denomination or sect to which the applicant belongs (e.g., Catholic, Orthodox Jewish, or Shia Muslim), then RLUIPA will be violated. The Department of Justice filed suit alleging that a mosque in Georgia was discriminated against in violation of Section 2(b)(2), based on statements by city officials indicating bias, evidence that the city sought to appease citizens who had expressed bias, and evidence that the city had previously approved numerous similarly sized and located places of worship of other faiths.<sup>11</sup> The case was resolved by consent decree. Similarly, the Department filed suit in order to challenge a zoning change enacted by a New York municipality that prevented the construction of a Hasidic Jewish boarding school.<sup>12</sup> The case was resolved by consent decree.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520, 546 (1993).

<sup>9</sup> *Opulent Life Church v. City of Holly Springs*, 697 F.3d 279 (5th Cir. 2012).

<sup>10</sup> *United States v. Waukegan*, No. 08-C-1013 (N.D. Ill. filed February 19, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> *United States v. City of Lilburn* 1:11-CV-2871 (N.D. Ga. filed August 29, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> *United States v. Village of Airmont*, 05 Civ. 5520 (S.D.N.Y. filed June 10, 2005).

**5. RLUIPA protects against the total or unreasonable exclusion of religious assemblies from a jurisdiction.**

Under section 2(b)(3) of RLUIPA, a zoning code may not completely, or unreasonably, limit religious assemblies in a jurisdiction. Thus, if there is no place where houses of worship are permitted to locate, or the zoning regulations looked at as a whole deprive religious institutions of reasonable opportunities to build or locate in the jurisdiction, this provision will be violated. For example, a Federal district court in Florida granted summary judgment to a synagogue on its unreasonable limitations claim, holding that RLUIPA was violated where “there was limited availability of property for the location of religious assemblies, religious assemblies were subject to inflated costs in order to locate in the City, and religious assemblies were subject to more stringent requirements than other similar uses.”<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \* \*

The Department of Justice is committed to carrying out Congress’s mandate and ensuring that religious assemblies and institutions do not suffer from discriminatory or unduly burdensome land use regulations. We look forward to working collaboratively with you and all other stakeholders on these important issues. Should you have questions about the contents of this letter, or other issues related to RLUIPA, I encourage you to contact Eric Treene, Special Counsel for Religious Discrimination, at 202.514.2228 or Eric.Treene@USDOJ.gov.

Sincerely,



Vanita Gupta  
Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General  
Civil Rights Division

---

<sup>13</sup> *Chabad of Nova, Inc. v. City of Cooper City*, 575 F. Supp. 2d 1280, 1290 (S.D. Fla. 2008).