

Dear Editor,

Throughout American constitutional history, the free exercise of religion has always been a first tier right. The Founders even placed it first in the First Amendment. Government, most of them understood, had no right to interfere with the peaceful religious beliefs, words, and actions of citizens. Yet, when legal cases were brought to secular courts, the courts had to balance competing constitutional claims.

The courts used the "strict scrutiny standard," meaning that government cannot substantially burden the free exercise of religion without compelling justification of the highest order (such as public safety), and even then must use the least restrictive means to accomplish the government's purpose. However, in 1990, the Supreme Court's *Oregon v. Smith* ruling suddenly lowered the strict scrutiny standard, which allowed religious liberty to be treated as a second-tier right to other constitutional claims.

In 1993, Congress passed the federal RFRA and restored the strict scrutiny standard for federal courts. However, it is up to States to pass the same legislation to ensure that state courts also use strict scrutiny. Every state surrounding Georgia passed RFRA years ago, and this broad-based religious liberty protection is needed here. Senate Bill 129, RFRA, has been held up in the Georgia House since last year and needs to be passed.

In addition, we need the First Amendment Defense Act (FADA). In light of the Supreme Court's ruling on marriage, religious citizens do not plan to compromise their sacred beliefs. However, in our nation, government bureaucrats are prosecuting people because they will not sanction the same-sex lifestyle through their talents, goods, and services, both in the marketplace and in the nonprofit world. People should be free to peacefully exercise their faith in every aspect of their lives without fear of lawsuits and government penalties. Let's all urge the Georgia's House to pass House Bill 757 immediately. Call Speaker David Ralston (404-656-5020) and Governor Nathan Deal (404-656-1776) immediately. The Georgia Legislative Session ends on March 24th.