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N.J. accuses Ocean County town of discriminating against Orthodox Jews

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New Jersey's attorney general is accusing Jackson Township of discriminating against Orthodox Jews, the second lawsuit the Ocean County municipality is facing in less than a year over the issue.

The complaint filed Tuesday accuses a number of public officials of selectively enforcing local rules and creating new ones to discourage the Orthodox from living or worshipping in town.

"We've filed this lawsuit because bias and hate have no home in New Jersey, and we will not allow some vocal residents' intolerance to drive local government decisions," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement. "Like all public servants, municipal officials have a duty to uphold the law, not weaponize it against specific groups because of what they believe or how they worship."

Terence Wall, Jackson's Business Administrator, said he was "surprised" to learn about the filing. The municipality had given state investigators "thousands" of documents a year ago but hadn't heard anything since, he said.

"Before one level of government decides to sue another, we would think it would be in the best interests of the taxpayers for the parties to at least sit down and attempt to resolve any issues or review any facts which may be in dispute," he wrote in an email. "Jackson Township is a community of over 60,000 residents, including members of nearly every faith and the Township will defend itself appropriately."

Township Council Vice President Martin Flemming and an attorney for the zoning board declined comment. Messages left with Mayor Michael Reina, the other four council members and the planning board were not immediately returned.

Tensions have been rising for years between the Jewish Orthodox community and other residents. Jackson borders Lakewood, home to tens of thousands of Orthodox Jews and one of the world's largest yeshivas, a type of religious school.

The U.S. Department of Justice sued the township and planning board last May, over local ordinances investigators said were designed to keep out Orthodox Jews.

The state's lawsuit, filed in Ocean County Superior Court, goes further.

Residents first pressured local officials about an "'extremist religious group' seeking to 'take over our town' and 'destroy our neighborhoods,'" according to the complaint.

In response, officials scoured code books for ways to selectively cite Orthodox Jews for a range of alleged offenses, even staking out homes to see if too many people were gathering to pray, the complaint alleged.

The “home monitoring never uncovered significant violations” and “the Township did not conduct a similar surveillance campaign for suspected religious gatherings hosted by anyone other than Orthodox Jews,” according to the lawsuit.

It also cited other recent incidents of bias, including a now-defunct Facebook page accused of anti-Semitism.

The complaint seeks to overturn the zoning ordinances and to have Jackson Township pay a fine.