

Correspondence with Devin M. Major

Complete exchange, August 16 to August 18, 2026. Two items. Town of Bristol, Lord's Prayer Rock correspondence file, log item 005.

1. Received — Sunday, August 16, 2026 — letter, forwarded by Selectboard member Michelle Perlee

From: Devin M. Major

To: Bristol Select Board

Letter titled "Rebuttal to the July 28, 2026 letter concerning the Lord's Prayer Rock," addressed to the members of the Select Board and Bristol residents. Reproduced in full on the following pages, exactly as received.

2. Sent — Tuesday, August 18, 2026, 11:13 AM

From: Ian Albinson <ialbinson.sb.bristolvt@gmail.com>

To: Rojamdk21@gmail.com

Subject: Your letter regarding Lord's Prayer Rock

Dear Mr. Major,

Thank you for your letter, which reached the Selectboard on August 16 by way of one of our members. It has been logged and shared with all five members.

I want to be straightforward about how the Town can treat it. Your letter sets out a detailed legal argument, and while the Selectboard has it in full, the Town cannot adopt an analysis prepared by a member of the public as its own legal position. If the Selectboard needs a legal opinion on any of these questions, it will seek one through Town counsel.

The Selectboard has taken no action on the matter and has nothing pending before it. Your letter is a public record under Vermont law, as is this reply.

Regards,

Ian

Ian Albinson, Selectboard Chair | Town of Bristol | www.bristolvt.org | (802) 458-5576

This email and any replies may be public records under Vermont law (1 V.S.A. §§ 315-320).

Cover sheet prepared August 18, 2026. The outgoing reply is transcribed verbatim from the Selectboard Chair's email; it is a transcript, not a native export from the mail client. Mr. Major's letter follows in full as the document received. Supersedes LPR_Corr_2026-08-16_Major_In.pdf, now in Archive/.

Bristol Select Board
1 South St.
PO Box 249
Bristol, VT 05443

Re: Rebuttal to the July 28, 2026 letter concerning the Lord's Prayer Rock

Dear Members of the Select Board and Bristol Residents:

As someone who did a class paper on the history of the Lord's Prayer Rock in Highschool, I submit this letter as a born and raised Vermont Resident, and outsider of the Bristol community in response to the July 28, 2026 correspondence from Santo Santoriello regarding the Lord's Prayer Rock. That letter asserts four problems and concludes that the only solution is to break up the rock and haul the debris away. Each claim is addressed below. Taken together, the arguments do not establish illegality, do not compel destruction, and do not outweigh the rock's documented history, community acceptance, and legal status.

Background the letter omits

The Lord's Prayer Rock is a large natural boulder along the roadway east of Bristol village (commonly associated with the VT 17 / VT 116 corridor area). In 1891, Dr. Joseph C. Greene, who had grown up in the South Starksboro area and later practiced medicine in Buffalo, New York, paid a carver to inscribe the Lord's Prayer on the stone. Contemporary and later accounts link the choice of site to Greene's boyhood work hauling logs to the Bristol sawmill: the rock marked the end of a difficult stretch of road, and he associated it with relief and gratitude. After traveling abroad and seeing enduring carved inscriptions, he carried out the project he had long contemplated. The inscription has remained in place for roughly 135 years and is widely treated as a local landmark and point of interest, not as a modern advertising installation.

This history matters. The rock was not created by the Town as a religious campaign. It is a private 19th-century act of commemoration on a pre-existing natural feature that the community has known and largely retained ever since.

(1) Traffic and safety

Safety deserves serious attention. It does not follow that demolition is the only, or best, response.

The rock's roadside location is longstanding. Drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians who use that corridor regularly are generally aware of it. Practical mitigations already associated with such features include high-visibility edge marking (the rock has long been noted for a painted corner to aid drivers), signage, speed management, shoulder and sight-line maintenance, winter plowing protocols, and, where appropriate, engineered adjustments to the traveled way. Those tools address the real issues the letter raises—sudden entry into the roadway, limited shy distance for cyclists and pedestrians, and winter hazards—without erasing a landmark.

History undercuts the claim that destruction is the inevitable safety answer. At the 1957 annual village meeting, trustees sought authorization to remove a section of the rock to improve road conditions at the corner. Voters overwhelmingly rejected that proposal. In 1958, the Vermont Highway Department conducted preliminary survey work aimed at rebuilding the road around the rock while preserving it as a tourist attraction. The community's settled preference, when the question was put directly, was preservation with roadway accommodation—not demolition.

Anecdote about children darting from behind the rock, or about pedestrians being forced into the travel lane, may justify targeted traffic-calming and pedestrian improvements. It does not convert a fixed, famous roadside feature into a legal nuisance that must be destroyed. Many Vermont roads pass close to ledge, utility poles, historic walls, bridges, and village buildings. The standard response is design, marking, and maintenance, not dynamiting the obstacle. If the Town or Agency of Transportation has current crash data, sight-distance measurements, or winter incident records specific to this location, those should drive proportionate engineering—not a letter's assertion that breakup is the "only solution."

(2) The "illegal billboard" claim

Vermont's outdoor advertising law (the framework built around the 1968 billboard ban and related provisions in Title 10) regulates outdoor advertising structures and off-premises commercial signs. Its purpose was to stop the proliferation of billboards and similar advertising displays that clutter scenic corridors and monetize the roadside for off-site business promotion.

The Lord's Prayer Rock does not fit that category.

- It is a natural boulder, not a constructed advertising structure erected to display commercial messages.
- The inscription dates to 1891, generations before the billboard ban.
- It does not advertise a business, product, service, or off-premises commercial activity.
- It functions as a historic inscribed landmark and cultural feature, not as a billboard in ordinary or statutory sense.

Calling any visible roadside text a "billboard" empties the term of meaning. Vermont's law targets outdoor advertising, with defined categories and exemptions; it was never a mandate to sandblast or destroy 19th-century commemorative carvings on natural rock. Historic monuments, markers, and non-commercial cultural inscriptions are not the commercial off-premises signs the statute was written to eliminate. Treating the Prayer Rock as an illegal billboard confuses heritage with highway advertising and finds no sound basis in the purpose or structure of Vermont's billboard regime.

(3) Establishment Clause / separation of church and state

The letter asserts that Town ownership or maintenance of the rock is illegal under the Vermont and U.S. Constitutions as a religious advertisement, and that it is "totally different" from owning

a repurposed church building. That overstates the law and ignores controlling modern precedent on longstanding passive displays.

Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, the government may not establish religion. It is not required to purge the public landscape of every historic object with religious content. The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly recognized that longstanding monuments with religious imagery or text can be constitutional when they are passive, historically embedded, and not used as instruments of coercion or preferential worship.

In *American Legion v. American Humanist Association* (2019), the Court held that the Bladensburg Peace Cross—a large Latin cross on public land, maintained with public involvement for decades as a war memorial—did not violate the Establishment Clause. The Court emphasized that retaining established, religiously expressive monuments is different from erecting new ones, that the passage of time carries a strong presumption of constitutionality, and that destruction or radical alteration of such a memorial can itself convey hostility toward religion rather than neutrality. Earlier cases in the same family, including *Van Orden v. Perry* (Ten Commandments monument on capitol grounds), likewise uphold passive historic displays in context.

The Lord's Prayer Rock aligns with that framework more closely than with a forbidden government religious advertisement:

- Private origin (1891 commission by Dr. Greene), not a Town-sponsored proselytizing program.
- Extreme longevity—well over a century in place—with broad recognition as a local landmark.
- Passive character: an inscription on rock, not a government-led worship service, religious curriculum, or preferential funding of ministry.
- Secular historic and cultural meanings layered onto the site: boyhood gratitude and safe passage, roadside heritage, tourism interest, and continuity of place.
- Community retention, including the 1957 vote against cutting the rock for the road.

Town association with the site—whether through right-of-way adjacency, basic maintenance, or recognition as a landmark—does not convert the rock into an official church. Governments routinely own or maintain cemeteries with religious symbols, historic chapels, place names of religious origin, and memorials that include religious language. The constitutional line is about establishment and coercion, not about guaranteeing that no passerby will ever see a historic religious text on public or publicly adjacent land.

The letter's "I am a member of a Christian church" point does not change the legal analysis. The question is not the writer's personal faith; it is whether the Constitution requires the Town to destroy this object. It does not. Threatening litigation does not substitute for a meritorious claim. A suit demanding demolition of a 135-year-old passive landmark would face the presumption recognized in *American Legion* and the practical reality that removal would be widely understood as hostility to a settled historic feature, not neutral housekeeping.

(4) Building permit and building code

The claim that the stone was “made into a monument without a building permit” and “does not conform to building code” misapplies modern development rules to a 19th-century inscription on a natural boulder.

- A pre-existing rock is not a “building.” Carving text into ledge or boulder in 1891 is not the construction of a structure under contemporary zoning and building-permit regimes.
- Modern building codes and permit systems did not govern 1891 roadside carvings in the way they govern houses, additions, or new constructed monuments today.
- Longstanding features are routinely treated as grandfathered or nonconforming as to later-adopted dimensional and permit rules. Retroactive permit requirements are not a blank check to order destruction of historic objects that predate the code.
- Even if some later Town or state action touched the site (marking, minor work, right-of-way decisions), that does not reopen 1891 for a modern building-permit prosecution ending in demolition.

If the concern is truly code or right-of-way compliance, the remedy is a factual review of jurisdiction, right-of-way limits, and any actual safety defect—not a presumption that the landmark is unlawful because no 1891 permit file exists.

Why “break up the rock” is not the only—or proper—solution

The letter stacks four theories and treats demolition as the sole cure. That conclusion fails for independent reasons:

- Safety is addressed by engineering, visibility, speed, and pedestrian accommodations; voters and highway planners have already explored preservation-compatible road work.
- Billboard law does not classify a non-commercial 1891 rock inscription as an illegal billboard.
- Constitutional law protects longstanding passive monuments against exactly this kind of removal mandate; destruction is not neutrality.
- Permit/code arguments do not meaningfully apply to a natural boulder inscribed before modern codes, and they do not require pulverizing the landmark.

A descriptive historical marker could supplement the site. It is not a legal prerequisite for allowing the inscription to remain, nor is stripping the prayer while leaving a barren stump a coherent heritage outcome. “Appealing to history or sentiment” is not a weak substitute for law here; history is part of the legal context under binding Supreme Court precedent, and sentiment reflects a century of community acceptance that the 1957 vote made explicit.

Constructive path for the Town

Rather than accept a false choice between doing nothing and destroying the rock, the Select Board can:

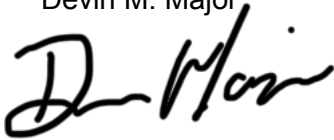
- Ask the appropriate highway authority for a current safety assessment (sight distance, shoulder use, crash history, winter operations) and implement proportionate mitigations.
- Clarify ownership and right-of-way status so maintenance responsibilities are clean.
- Recognize the rock formally as a local historic landmark and, if desired, add neutral interpretive signage about Greene, the 1891 carving, and the site's place in Bristol's story.
- Reject the premise that litigation risk requires preemptive demolition; the stronger legal exposure, on this record, lies in treating a long-upheld form of historic display as contraband.

Conclusion

Mr. Santoriello's letter raises traffic proximity as a fair topic for municipal and highway attention. It does not demonstrate that the Lord's Prayer Rock is an illegal billboard, an unconstitutional establishment of religion, or an unpermitted building that must be broken up. The rock is a natural feature bearing a private 1891 inscription, retained for generations, declined for partial removal by local voters when road work was proposed, and consistent with the constitutional treatment of longstanding passive monuments. The Town can manage safety and stewardship without erasing one of Bristol's most recognizable historic landmarks.

Respectfully submitted,

Devin M. Major

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Major", written in a cursive style.