

Frequently Asked Questions: Lenawee County Amish Eviction Cases

Q: What is this case about?

A: About a dozen Old-Order Amish families live in Lenawee County. Most moved to the county in 2015-16 from neighboring counties where they have had no major problems with the local governments. These families lead a peaceful and simple lifestyle, as dictated by their faith. Many of the Amish can trace their ancestry to European settlers who fled to America to avoid religious persecution. They do not utilize modern technology such as electricity or running water. Their religion also requires them to minimize the waste that they produce and to rely on self-toil to sustain themselves, their families, and their farms.

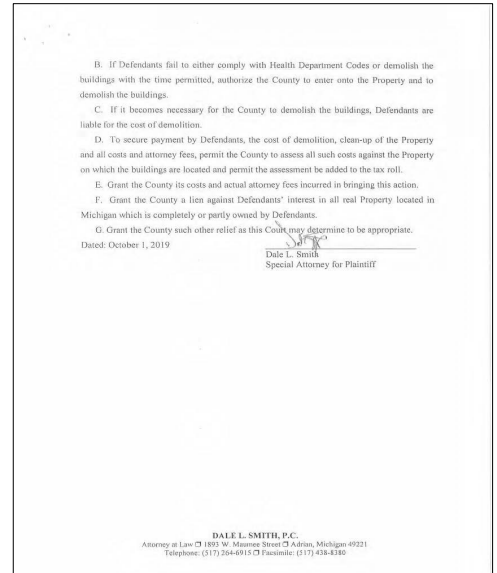
Shortly after the Amish moved to Lenawee County, County health officials began harassing the Amish families by sending threatening letters and communications seem intended to coerce the Amish to use modern running water and sewage systems that are inconsistent with the Amish's beliefs and that are unnecessary given their pre-modern lifestyle.



The Amish have tried on multiple occasions to seek a compromise, but each time they have done so, County officials have been uninterested in compromise and have made it clear that it is the proverbial “my way or the highway.” In 2019, the County sent sheriff’s deputies to each Amish home and plastered signs on their doors stating that the homes were “unfit for human habitation.” In October of 2019, the County filed lawsuits against every Amish family residing in Lenawee. The ACLU and the law firm of Wright & Schulte, along with attorneys John Shea and Jacob Bender became involved to defend the Amish against Lenawee County’s remarkable attempt to purge an entire religious community from its borders.

Q: Is Lenawee County really trying to demolish Amish homes?

A: Absolutely. The County filed lawsuits against every single Amish family in the county on the same day. Each lawsuit asks the court to “authorize the County to enter onto the Property and to demolish the buildings” if the Amish do not bow to all of the County’s inflexible demands—demands that are inconsistent with the Amish’s religious beliefs. The Complaints further demands that the court order the Amish to pay for the costs of having their own homes demolished, and seeks a lien against the Amish properties (see photo excerpt). Thus, if the County succeeds in its lawsuit, it will have seized hundreds of acres of land from the Amish, purged the community from its borders, and sent the bill for doing so to the Amish community.



Q: Is this case really about religious liberty, or is it just about health and safety codes?

A: This case has everything to do with religious liberty. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution, as well as the constitution of the state of Michigan, provide strong protections for religious liberties. In general, people in this state and country have the right to practice their religious beliefs so long as doing so does not cause harm to others. This requires governments like Lenawee County to be flexible in dealing with religious minorities—flexibility that County officials have never exhibited with the Amish. There is no evidence whatsoever that the simple lifestyle being led by the Lenawee County Amish is harming anyone. The Lenawee Amish lead a lifestyle very similar to that led by Old Order Amish communities in neighboring counties and throughout Michigan and the nation. The County’s refusal to recognize, or even seek to understand, the needs of this community, and the County’s decision to instead threaten their homes and livelihoods is religious persecution, plain and simple.

Q: Did the County try to work things out with the Amish before filing suit?

A: Not in any meaningful way. The County has dealt with the Amish primarily by sending threatening bureaucratic letters demanding, among other things, that the Amish install running water other modern amenities in their homes. Even for trained attorneys, it is not easy to understand some of these letters or what exactly the County is demanding of the Amish. On the few occasions when county officials sat down with the Amish, the officials’ attitude have been rude, inflexible, and officious. They have refused to listen or try to understand the religious beliefs of the Amish and have simply insisted that the Amish install the types of systems that the County wants them to install. Indeed, the County’s typical approach to such meetings has been to prepare documents in advance stating exactly what the Amish must do and to demand that the Amish take it or leave it. The Amish have never been offered solutions that are consistent with their religious beliefs. In fact, no

County official has taken the time to listen and understand Amish beliefs, let alone try to work with the Amish to find solutions that are consistent with their beliefs.

With that said, Amish religious beliefs also favor peaceable resolutions to conflict. We remain hopeful that, now that we are involved, it may be possible to reach a reasonable resolution with the County without the need for protracted and costly litigation.

Q: Do the Amish pose any threat to the environment of Lenawee County?

A: No. Amish households use only a few gallons of water per day, and most carry all the water they use from a well pump to their homes. They do not take running showers, and use only the barest minimum of water necessary to cook and wash their clothes, dishes, and body. By contrast, the average American uses 80-100 gallons of water per person, per day.¹ Even if the Amish disposed of the few gallons of water that they use per day on their property, it would be no different than letting the water from washing your car run down your driveway.

The County claims to be concerned about the Amish use of bio-solids as fertilizer. This is ironic, because farmers (including factory farms) throughout the County makes extensive use of bio-solids as fertilizer. It is scientifically established that bio-solids can be used as fertilizer when properly treated and applied. The Amish's use of natural and organic farming techniques is harmless and in any event pales in comparison to the farming activities regularly practiced and permitted throughout the County.

Q: I heard that the Amish don't hire lawyers. How did a bunch of lawyers get involved?

A: Because of their religious beliefs, the Amish generally do not go to court to resolve issues. But that decision was foisted on them in this case by the County when it decided to sue every Amish family and threaten to demolish their homes. Without lawyers, the County could already be bulldozing the Amish homes at this very moment, so the Amish were left with no choice but to seek legal help to save their homes.

When we learned their situation, our respective organizations all agreed to represent the Amish free of charge because of our respect for their right to lead their peaceful way of life free from unwarranted government abuse and interference.

¹ https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/water-ga-how-much-water-do-i-use-home-each-day?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects

Q: How can I help the Amish?

A: If you live in Lenawee County, we urge you to contact your county commissioners directly. This lawsuit is being brought by the County in your name, with your tax dollars, by your elected officials. Call your county commissioner, or better yet, attend a commission meeting or write a letter to the editor and let your elected representatives know how you feel. If you don't live in Lenawee County, you can send a message to the commissioners as well to let them know that the nation is watching. To send a message to the County Commissioners, [click here](#).