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Des Moines Adopts Anti-PATRIOT Act Resolution

by R. Ben Stone, ACLU-IA Executive Director

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Iowa's largest city becomes second Iowa community to pass pro-civil liberties statement on the controversial act.

DES MOINES - By a vote of 4-3, the Des Moines City Council last night passed a resolution condemning aspects of the PATRIOT Act and seeking redress from federal officials. The action made Iowa's capitol city the 342nd city or state in the nation to adopt an anti-Patriot act resolution.

"We're thrilled the city's leaders recognize the people of Des Moines deserve to be both safe and free," said Ben Stone, Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa, which lobbied heavily for the resolution. "The so-called PATRIOT act has several provisions that are deeply troubling to liberals and conservatives alike, and the council recognized that," he said.

Since the PATRIOT act was adopted in October of 2001, four states and 338 towns have adopted anti-PATRIOT act resolutions. Des Moines' adoption takes the number of people represented by bodies passing such resolutions to over 53 million.

Ames became the first community in the state to pass an anti-Patriot Act resolution last March. In 2003, the city council in Iowa City rejected a resolution, choosing instead to send a letter to members of Congress stating specific concerns about the use of the Act. The city council in Lincoln, Nebraska is poised to discuss a resolution in August.

Two government officials spoke to the council in a failed effort to convince the council to reject the resolution: Des Moines Police Chief Bill McCarthy and Matthew Whitacker, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of Iowa.

Council member Tom Vlassis told the audience that he had received 30 communications supporting the resolution for every communication that opposed it. Along with Vlassis, Michael Kiernan, Archie Brooks and Mayor Frank Cownie supported the resolution. Christine Hensley, Chris Coleman and Bob Mehaffey opposed it.

Whitacker referred to Patriot Act "myths" in his remarks. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has been touting these so-called myths in a largely ineffective Pro-PATRIOT Act publicity campaign that began nearly a year ago. The ACLU and others have largely exposed these myths to be falsehoods, and community leaders appear to be rejecting the Justice Department's spin. Since the DOJ's campaign began on August 18, 2003, the number of communities adopting anti-Patriot act resolutions has more than doubled, from 152 to 342.

The growing number of communities adopting anti-Patriot Act resolutions have helped generate bi-partisan efforts in Congress to amend portions of the PATRIOT act. A recent House amendment that dealt with government access to library records only failed after the GOP leadership resorted to extreme tactics to coerce Republican members to switch their votes. For more on the Patriot Act itself, efforts to amend it, and explanations debunking the DOJ's "myths," visit the ACLU's website at: www.aclu.org/safeandfree

To learn more about the national effort to pass resolutions, visit the Bill of Rights Defense Committee's website at: www.bordc.org