

Board steers clear of religious questions

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WALKERSVILLE -- When Roman Storzer broached the subject of religious intolerance at a Board of Zoning Appeals hearing Friday, he was quickly silenced.

Storzer represents David Moxley, who wants to sell 224 acres to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community for a worship and recreation center. At the hearing, he asked Creekside Park Homeowners Association representative Jeff Schouw if he had ever heard anti-Muslim sentiments at association meetings.

"Mr. Storzer come on," said board member Dan Thomas. "It's not relevant."

The hearing was held to decide whether to approve the sale and grant the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community a special exception to use agricultural land for religious purposes. The hearings are scheduled to continue Monday and could last several more days.

Storzer's question came after Schouw had given a PowerPoint presentation showing pictures and video of the annual Jalsa Salana festival held in other countries.

Ahmadiyya would like to host the festival on the land, near Walkersville High School. Dr. Ahsan Zafar, Ahmadiyya's president, has estimated the festival could draw between 5,000 and 10,000 people.

Schouw showed pictures of vehicles parked, bumper to bumper, on both shoulders of a dirt road and on the road itself, waiting to find parking. He showed an open field with multiple deep tire marks in the mud.

He closed his presentation by playing a video showing a large number of people during a Jalsa Salana flag hoisting ceremony in the United Kingdom. The people were chanting and screaming.

"Please save our town, land and quality of life," Schouw said as he looked to the three-member board.

Storzer asked Schouw why he decided to include the video in his presentation.

Schouw said he wanted to help residents understand what happens at Jalsa Salana.

Storzer then asked if Schouw had ever heard any anti-Muslim statements at his homeowners association meetings.

Attorney Robert McGill, who represents eight groups opposed to the land sale including the Citizens for Walkersville, immediately objected, saying the question was inappropriate.

The Board of Appeals is allowed to deny Ahmadiyya's request for an exception based on 13 factors, such as traffic and the appropriate use of land. Religion is not among the 13 factors.

The board agreed with McGill and Thomas said the board would not make its decision based on religion.

The board also heard from several other representatives of homeowners associations. All opposed the land sale due to concerns over Jalsa Salana, traffic and the value of their homes.

During Jalsa Salana, Conrad Bangh said, he and his wife, Jennifer Bangh, would probably be prisoners in their home, which is near the 244 acres.

"A simple trip to the grocery store may be unattainable," he said.

Jennifer Bangh testified after her husband and told the board that the festival's noise and people would deter her from doing things she loves, like having a cup of coffee on her front porch.

Jane Stockdale, whose home is two blocks from the land, said the value of her house would decrease if the board allows the exception.



Photo by Sam Yu

Over 190 people filled a large meeting room at the Walkersville Town Hall on Friday night for a continuation of the Walkersville Board of Zoning Appeals hearing on the proposal of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community to build a worship and recreation center.