

Thursday, Jan. 17, 2008

Dozens testify, most cite reasons Muslim retreat center should be denied

by Jeremy Hauck | Staff Writer

The Walkersville Zoning Board of Appeals hearings on a Muslim group's request for a special exception, to use a historic farm in town for a place of worship and annual three-day summer religious retreats, were expected to end Wednesday.

At the conclusion of Tuesday night's hearing, only the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community's closing arguments, and the appeals board's discussion and decision remained unfinished.

Tuesday, Jan. 8

Walkersville town planner Susan Hauver read the town staff's review of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA's application for a special exception. The review's sternest warning on the Ahmadis' proposed retreat center is about water and sewer utilities.

Ahsan Zafar, president of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community (AMC), told the board that the AMC has never had any complaints from Montgomery County officials, either about its mosque or the retreats the group held there for nearly a decade.

Zafar also said the proposed retreat center would be open to Walkersville residents and would be empty most of the year, except for services for local Ahmadis and four three-day events. Zafar said the Nicodemus Farm would be "an ideal location" for Jalsa Salana.

Board members rejected a sheaf of e-mails and statements by Citizens for Walkersville members that Justin P. Hayes, lead attorney for the Muslims, said demonstrated bias against the Ahmadis.

Wednesday, Jan. 9

Hauver read a letter from the State Highway Administration that did not list any objections, from a traffic perspective, to the proposed retreat center or the Ahmadis' traffic management plan for Jalsa.

Zoning Board of Appeals members questioned the Ahmadis and their witnesses on water and sewer utilities and traffic.

Citizens for Walkersville called an urban planner to testify against the proposed retreat center. Hayes objected to the board's consideration of the planner as an expert witness.

William "Topper" Cramer, chief of Walkersville Volunteer Rescue Company No. 24, urged the board to deny the Ahmadis' request, on behalf of the company. Cramer argued that the Jalsa would overwhelm his department.

Thursday, Jan. 10

Robert R. McGill, lead attorney for Citizens for Walkersville and seven homeowners associations, declined to cross-examine the Ahmadis and their witnesses. Thirteen residents opposing the retreat center did cross, leading to two heated exchanges that involved Zafar. Paul

Huff used press clippings to try to corner Zafar into admitting that the AMC was insincere about wishing to be welcomed into Walkersville. Chris Blackard argued that the Ahmadis would use landscaping to seal the property off from the town, thus contradicting their stated desire to be assimilated into Walkersville. Zafar said both points of view were incorrect.

Matt Staley, chief of Walkersville Volunteer Fire Company No. 11, told the board, under cross-examination by Hayes, that attendance at the annual fire carnival can reach 4,000.

Citizens for Walkersville called a civil engineer and a utility design specialist to testify against the retreat center.

Friday, Jan. 11

The Citizens for Walkersville testimony continued. Jeff Schouw presented a slide show and video showing Jalsa Salana participants in other countries. Roman P. Storzer, an attorney representing Moxley, asked Schouw why he played the video, which contained flags, a march and voices screaming in a foreign language. Schouw said it demonstrated what could occur in Walkersville if the special exception is granted.

Several residents testified that the Ahmadis could seek to build residential developments on the Nicodemus farm in the future. Others decried the possible side effects from Jalsa crowds. Jennifer Bangh said the sounds of car doors and engines would be invasive. June Stockdale said dust would force her to close windows.

McGill submitted a 45-page brief and testified against the retreat center, calling it a “convention center” dozens of times during his hour at the podium. He concluded by claiming the center would “urbanize” Walkersville.

Monday, Jan. 14

Public testimony began. The first 14 individuals testified and were cross-examined. Of those individuals, 13 spoke against the retreat center.

Midway through, the town’s attorney interrupted a speaker, saying only residents could testify as individuals. Danny O’Connor claimed that the hearings could stretch to four weeks if every Ahmadi came and testified. Ansar Ahmad, an Ahmadi from Montgomery County who had cross-examined McGill on Friday, was forced to end his cross examination of Anne Hall. The board agreed with O’Connor, but later reversed its decision.

Tuesday, Jan. 15

Twelve more people testified; nine were against the center. George Rudy said the center would be a positive development for Walkersville.

Land owner David Moxley, during a 30-minute presentation, rebutted Citizens’ criticism of the proposed retreat center. McGill and other residents heaped accusations of greed and ignorance on Moxley during cross examination.

Storzer outlined a federal statute that he said protects religious groups from being unfairly zoned against.

Citizens accused him of threatening the town and calling its residents bigots, both of which he denied.

Hayes interviewed Zafar for nine minutes to begin the Ahmadis’ closing arguments. Zafar said Ahmadi families living nearby would use the center frequently.