

Maryland town takes up issue of Muslim retreat

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WALKERSVILLE, Maryland: A zoning amendment that could derail a Muslim group's plan to build a worship and conference center in a small Maryland town is expected to be tackled Wednesday, marking the latest effort to scuttle plans for the new development.

The project proposed by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA, whose origins trace back to a Pakistani holy man at the turn of the 20th century, has encountered fierce resistance in small, but overwhelmingly white, Christian town where the mayor has previously described Muslims as a "whole different culture from us."

On Tuesday, another town official, Commissioner Chad Weddle sought to deflect allegations that he gave \$500 to a citizens group that opposes plans for the mosque and convention center and advised the Citizens for Walkersville on how to defeat the project.

The allegations surfaced in a sworn affidavit hours before the planning commission in the town of 5,600 voted on a zoning amendment proposed by Weddle that could block the project by prohibiting places of worship, schools and private clubs on agricultural land. The amendment, if approved, could kill the Muslim group's plans.

In a 4-2 vote, the commission agreed to recommend approval of the ordinance, The Frederick News-Post reported.

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The Town Council will conduct a public hearing on the amendment on Wednesday, during which it will consider the planning commission's recommendation.

Weddle declined to comment on his personal views about the Ahmadis' plan to construct on the 224-acre site a two-story, multiple-use building that would serve as a mosque for 20 local families and as the center of annual national gatherings of 5,000 to 10,000 people.

He said his amendment, aimed at preserving open space, has been misconstrued as racist and biased, and that he met with the citizens group Oct. 13 only to explain the town's planning and zoning process.

"I have to explain the legal issues," said Weddle, an attorney. He said the citizens group was "like any constituent or applicant that wants to meet with me."

Calvin B. Haxton, a resident of nearby Emmitsburg who attended the Oct. 13 meeting at the request of the lawyer for the landowner, said in a sworn affidavit that he heard Weddle speak for about 30 minutes on "the best way to beat the Muslims."

He said Weddle distributed copies of town regulations with underlined sections that Weddle referred to as "talking points" — specific factors on which the Board of Zoning Appeals must base its decision on whether to approve or deny the Ahmadis' request for a needed special exception to the current zoning law.

Haxton also said that Weddle suggested the group get a lawyer and offered \$500 (€350) to help hire one.

The affidavit was given to reporters by Roman P. Storzer, a Washington lawyer specializing in religious land-use cases who is representing the owner of the land that the Silver Spring-based Ahmadis have contracted to buy.

Storzer said the town's adoption of Weddle's proposed zoning amendment would violate federal statutory protections of religious freedom.

He also said his client, David W. Moxley, plans to ask the U.S. Justice Department to investigate "the local hostility by both private citizens and the town's officials."

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