

October 23, 2007
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Meeting of Town officials with “citizens group” opposed to Muslim worship center prompts request from landowner

Storzer & Greene prepared to seek redress of any legal violations resulting from Town’s actions

On October 22, 2007, Storzer & Greene client David W. Moxley requested that the Walkersville, Maryland Planning Commission recommend to the Town Council that they reject a proposed ordinance amendment that would prevent places of worship from locating on agricultural land within the Town. This request was made to prevent a clear violation of federal statutory protections of religious freedom and also in response to Town officials’ involvement in an unadvertised meeting of a newly formed organization, Citizens for Walkersville, held early Saturday morning on October 13, 2007. This organization was specifically created to oppose the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community’s (“AMC”) construction of a place of worship on Mr. Moxley’s 224-acre parcel of land in Walkersville.

Town Commissioner Chad Weddle originally proposed the ordinance amendment only two days after the AMC held a public forum in the Walkersville Town Hall to inform citizens of their intended use of the Moxley property. Meetings on the proposed ordinance are being held by the Planning Commission tonight and by the Town Council tomorrow evening.

According to the sworn affidavit of Mr. Calvin B. Haxton of Emmitsburg, Maryland, who attended the October 13 meeting of the anti-AMC group and Town officials, various members of the Town Council and Planning Commission were also in attendance. Commissioner Weddle and others advised the group as to how to prevent the AMC from locating in the Town. Commissioner Weddle also pledged funds to the group, reviewed their petition and handed out a list of “talking points” that he suggested individuals should use in their opposition to the AMC at meetings before Town bodies. <Copies of Mr. Haxton’s affidavit are available upon request.> These efforts follow other Town actions and statements of its officials, such as Town Mayor Ralph Whitmore’s published comments that “[i]t’s a different culture moving into town . . . a culture we’re not used to” and “[t]here are people who are concerned because of who they are. There’s no two ways about it. Our relationship with the Muslim community is a little tender.”

“Tender or not, this is one of the most blatant examples of hostility to a particular religious group that I have ever seen,” said Roman P. Storzer, attorney for Mr. Moxley. “This is exactly why Congress passed the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. Zoning permits should not be denied and ordinances should not be passed to keep a particular religious group out, just because they may ‘change the culture’ or are perceived as different or unfamiliar to the community. We will take all appropriate action to ensure that the law is upheld, including a request to the federal Department of Justice to investigate this situation.”

RLUIPA was passed by Congress seven years ago to prevent discrimination against religious institutions in land use applications. The attorneys of Storzer and Greene, P.L.L.C. have represented scores of churches, temples, mosques and synagogues in land use conflicts from Hawaii to Florida, including recently the Riverdale Baptist Church in its lawsuit against Anne Arundel County. Mr. Storzer has been described by the Religion Newswriters Association as “one of the country’s most experienced litigators” in religious land use law, and has successfully represented Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Native American, Sikh and other religious organizations in RLUIPA and First Amendment cases throughout the nation.

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