

Maryland Politician Fights Muslim Group's Plans to Build Mosque on Farmland

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FOX NEWS

A local politician is seeking to stop a Muslim organization from building a mosque in a small Maryland town, sparking what could become a lengthy legal battle.

Chad Weddle, a lawyer and a town commissioner in Walkersville, Md., has proposed a zoning amendment that would prevent the construction of places of worship on land zoned for agriculture there.

"Agriculture shouldn't have buildings on it," Weddle said.

The amendment, if passed, would prevent the Ahmadiyya Community USA from building a mosque and recreation center on 224 acres of farmland.

Walkersville, 56 miles northwest of Washington, has 5,800 residents — 90 percent white and mostly dairy farmers.

Town officials and many members of the community are opposing the group's plans to build. Some residents are upset that if the mosque and center are built the organization plans to hold an annual convention that could draw thousands of Ahmadis.

The town, which doesn't hold large events except for an annual Fourth of July celebration on carnival grounds, may not be able to handle such a large event, Mayor Ralph Whitmore said.

Additionally, Whitmore said, some residents are "apprehensive of Muslims."

"Tensions are still there. We have a lot of people here who haven't forgotten 9/11."

Whitmore says people who have loved ones fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan have reservations about Muslims in the community, and fear remains after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"We're not a very diverse community," the mayor said.

Ahmadiyya Community USA says it hopes to enhance Walkersville through diversity, taking that message door-to-door to explain to concerned residents that they are a peaceful Muslim community.

"We are not the ones who are responsible for 9/11 in any shape or form," said Syed Ahmad, project manager for the group.

The group says it has been persecuted for peaceful beliefs that differ from those of other Muslims, according to an ad that appeared in a local newspaper. "We believe in human equality and not in violent jihad," according to the ad.

hmadiyya Community USA, with national headquarters in Silver Spring, Md., wants to build a mosque on the site, along with a building that will contain two basketball gyms, multi-purpose rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom facility.

"We are peace-loving human beings and want to work with the people of Walkersville," the group says in a document about the plan. "We respect different beliefs and independence in opinions. We are comfortable with life as it is in Walkersville and are not interested in changing the local community."

group of citizens in the town formed its own organization to circulate a petition against the Muslim group's plans.

Roman Storzer, a Washington lawyer who represents David Moxley, the owner of the farmland, calls the issue hostile. Moxley is seeking to sell the farmland to the group.

"Tender or not, this is one of the most blatant examples of hostility to a particular religious group that I have ever seen," Storzer said.

The Town Commission has postponed voting on Weddle's amendment, and the Board of Zoning appeals will host a public hearing in January that could allow the group to proceed with its plans.

If the town commission moves forward with the zoning amendment and it is approved, it would become law 20 days later.

The mayor has not said whether he supports Weddle's amendment, but he could be forced to break a tie vote.

Said Whitmore: "It's got everything in a real turmoil."