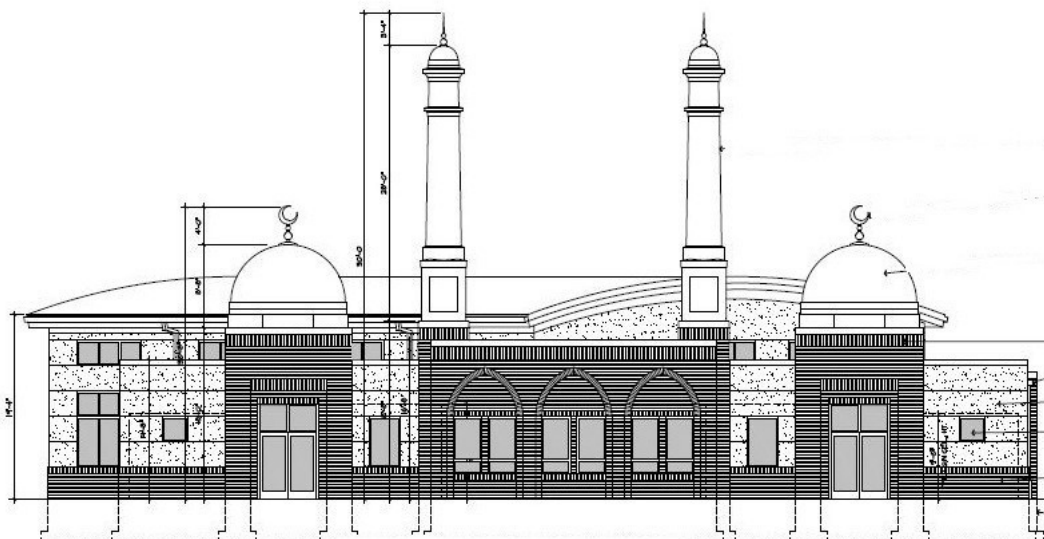


# Afton City Council signs off on plans for mosque in city



**WEST ELEVATION**  
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The Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro plans to build a 10,500-square-foot mosque in Afton. Islamic Society officials say they hope the mosque will open in the city's northwest corner in time for the start of the holy month of Ramadan in 2017; the month of fasting begins on May 27, 2017. The Islamic Society in 2013 purchased the 29 acres of land at 12585 Hudson Road, off the Interstate 94 frontage road.

By **MARY DIVINE** | [mdivine@pioneerpress.com](mailto:mdivine@pioneerpress.com) | Pioneer Press

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The Afton City Council's unanimous vote to approve plans for the city's first mosque on Tuesday night was met with cheers and applause by the standing-room-only audience at City Hall.

Many of the residents who attended the meeting stayed to greet and welcome members of the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro after the council voted 5-0 to approve a conditional-use permit for the Islamic Society to build a 10,500-square-foot mosque on 29 acres it bought in 2013 at 12585 Hudson Road, off the Interstate 94 frontage road.



The Afton City Council voted 5-0 Tuesday night to approve plans for a new mosque in the city in front of a standing-room only crowd at Afton City Hall. (Pioneer Press: Mary Divine)

“It’s good to see that a number of people from the community came to support us and welcome the new mosque,” Jaylani Hussein, executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations — Minnesota, said after the meeting. “We’re looking forward to having this mosque be an addition to this community’s growing diversity.”

Most of the dozen or so people who spoke at the meeting supported the plans for the mosque.

Former Mayor Jon Kroschel told the council that he envied them for having the chance to vote on the issue.

“It’s such a huge step in the right direction — not just for Washington County, not just for Afton, but the whole Twin Cities,” he said. “Make a statement. This is the direction we’re going. The world is getting smaller. They’re our neighbors. They’ve been our neighbors for 20 years, 30 years, 100 years. Welcome them, and let’s make this a community.”

Afton resident Carol Ellingson said the United States has “proudly proclaimed to the world that we are the land of free religion.”

“I’ll bet you that everybody in this room ... has ancestors who came here to avoid religious bigotry and persecution,” Ellingson said. “I believe that we should live the values that we preach to others, and that we should approve the mosque.”

But not all neighbors were so welcoming.

One man said construction of the mosque would lead to a decline in property values in the neighborhood.

“It’s an injustice to the people of Afton to see their homes depreciate in value,” he said. “It’s not fair.”

Another resident, Patricia Swanson, said no Afton residents have requested that the mosque be built.

“That means that the pressure to erect it is coming from outside the city of Afton, as well as its funding,” she said. “Lawsuits are ready to threaten us, our neighbors and our city if we refuse to allow this project to move forward. We are keenly aware that threats and force are just part of their jihad attack. This is an invasion.”

Others cited concerns about light and noise generated by the project.

“It has nothing to do with their religion, it’s the noise and the lights that bother me,” said Sandra Paulson, who lives directly behind the site. “With a hundred kids being out there all weekend, I’m not going to hear the birds anymore. I’m just going to hear kids screaming and yelling and playing.”

Said Dave Kephart: “I’ve lived there for 12 years. It’s a quiet neighborhood, and I want to keep it that way.”

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The council approved the conditional-use permit with a number of conditions. Among them: No loudspeakers will be allowed on the mosque's minarets or any part of the building.

The Islamic Society announced its plans late last month after years of meeting and worshiping in rented space in a Woodbury office park.

The society now meets in a 5,000-square-foot space in an office park behind Sam's Club. The mosque mainly serves residents of Woodbury, Afton, Lake Elmo, Cottage Grove and Oakdale.

The Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro expects that about 200 people will come to the mosque on Friday afternoons to worship together. About 100 students and teachers are expected to be at the mosque from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday for "weekend school," said City Administrator Ron Moore.

Islamic Society leaders plan to develop part of the property for the Afton mosque and continue to rent out about 19 acres as farmland.

The new mosque will include a 4,500-square-foot multipurpose hall that can be used for communal gatherings, as well as two community rooms and office space.

Islamic Society officials hope to open the mosque in time for next year's Ramadan, a holy month of fasting that will begin May 27.

David Nimmer, a longtime member of Memorial Lutheran Church in Afton, said he is looking forward to welcoming the Islamic Society to the city's faith community.

"I'm now old enough to know that there are several pathways to God," said Nimmer, 75, of Woodbury. "I would welcome Muslim brothers and sisters to join us on that journey. I come from a church that was started by Swedish immigrants, who I'm sure were treated with suspicion and distrust, and I would like to add some diversity to the richness of the spiritual fabric of this place."