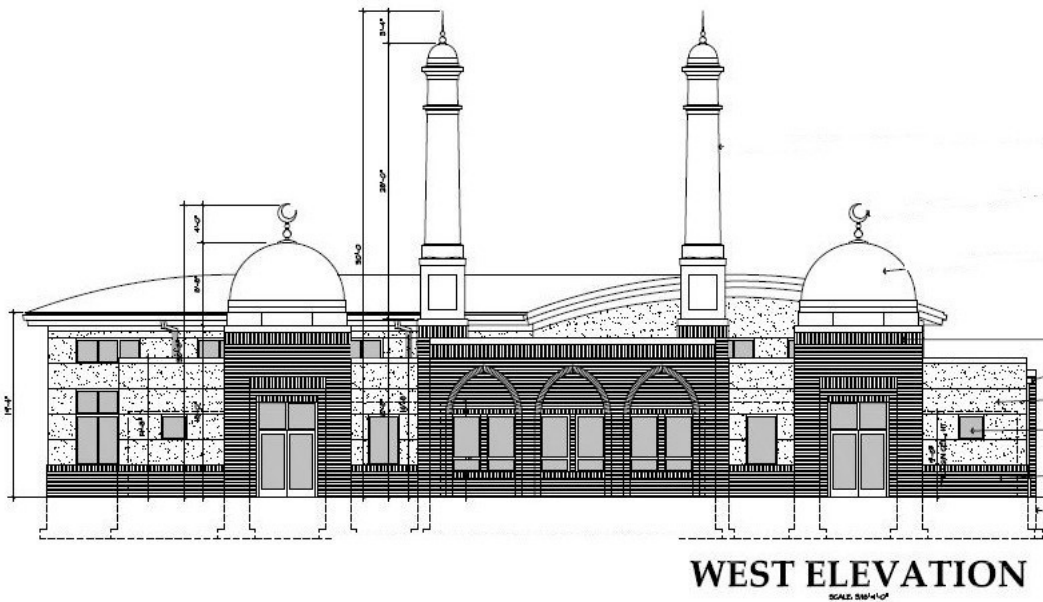

NEWS

Islamic Society plans to build mosque in Afton



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](mailto:mdivine@pioneerpress.com) | mdivine@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

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The Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro has announced plans to build a 10,500-square-foot mosque in Afton after years of meeting and worshipping in rented space in a Woodbury office park.

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

"There is a phrase we always say, 'Inshallah,' which means 'God willing,'" said Ifran Ali, a society board member and its communications chairman. "We'll try our best."

The society plans to build the mosque on 29 acres it bought in 2013 at 12585 Hudson Road, off the Interstate 94 frontage road.

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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, Ali said.

"We are the east-most mosque in Minnesota," Ali said. "We have people coming from Wisconsin, Stillwater and even Hastings. Going straight east or straight south, there is nothing else."

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

On Monday, the Afton Planning Commission will hold a public hearing on a conditional-use permit for the property and a variance request for a driveway expansion.

Mayor Richard Bend said he anticipates the Islamic Society's request will be approved.

"I met with them on Friday, and I think they're a wonderful group of people," Bend said. "I think we're fortunate to have another denomination to go in along that road — there's a Lutheran church just down the street."

Afton's land-use policies permit a mosque in the area, Bend said. "I don't foresee any difficulties or obstacles," he said. "This is a land-use issue, and a mosque is entirely appropriate use of the land."

The Islamic Society has been renting space in Woodbury since 2009. Ali, who is originally from Pakistan, said it quickly became apparent after he moved to Woodbury in 2003 from Coon Rapids that the east metro needed a dedicated space for Muslims to worship and gather.

"It was a big enough community and our kids were growing up, so we needed a place where we could meet together, not just for religious, but for spiritual and social get-togethers," Ali said.

"Most importantly for our kids, we just needed a space that they could congregate in for educational, social, religious and spiritual gatherings."

He said Islamic Society officials thought a 2,500-square-foot space in an office park would suffice in 2009.

"When we started, we didn't think that there was that a big a need," said Ali, a senior program manager at Medtronic. "But as soon as we started, the need was apparent — that's why we moved in 2010 into the new (5,000-square-foot) space."

By 2012, it was obvious that the rented space would no longer serve the Islamic Society "in the long run, especially with more and more people coming in the east metro, especially Woodbury," he said.

"What we were looking for is something that would give us a little more permanence and would also serve our community better and would be more tailored to what we need, rather than try to retrofit a rental space," Ali said.

About 150 people come to the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro to worship together on Fridays.

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.

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Mary Divine

Mary Divine is a reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. She covers Washington County and the St. Croix River Valley, but has also spent time covering the state Capitol. She has won numerous journalism awards, including the Premack Award and the Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists' Page One Award. Prior to joining the Pioneer Press in 1998, she worked for the Rochester, Minn., Post-Bulletin and at the St. Joseph, Mo., News-Press. Her work has also appeared in a number of magazines, including Mpls/St.Paul Magazine, Twin Cities Business Monthly and Minnesota Magazine. She is a graduate of Carleton College and lives in St. Paul with her husband, Greg Myers, and their three children, Henry, 18, Frances, 16, and Fred, 13.

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