

Afton welcomes Islamic center

For the past five years the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro has been holding worship services in a 2,500-square-foot office space along Commerce Drive in Woodbury.

Written By: Amber Kispert-Smith | Apr 5th 2016 - 6pm.

For the past five years the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro has been holding worship services in a 2,500-square-foot office space along Commerce Drive in Woodbury.

However, as the congregation has grown, it soon discovered that it needed a larger place of worship, one that it can call its own.

"We believe that they need a place where they can not only get religious education but get together with others of their same faith," said Irfan Ali, spokesman for the Islamic Society. "Come pray or play."

In 2013 the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro took the first step in finding a place of its own when it purchased a 29-acre parcel, located at 12585 Hudson Road in Afton, to build an Islamic center.

On April 4 the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro cleared a major hurdle when the Afton Planning Commission voted to recommend approval of a conditional-use permit (CUP) to build a 10,800-square-foot Islamic center.

"It was very encouraging," Ali said. "We are really excited about this and we look forward to blending into the community."

Afton allows for places of worship within its rural residential zoning district.

The Islamic Society of Woodbury

It was in 2012 that the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro first began looking for possible locations for its new Islamic center when it came across the property in Afton, which is a former hobby farm.

"We found this property that seemed to fit what we needed," Ali said. "It was big enough and we would have enough room for our kids to enjoy the open space out there."

The Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro is proposing to build a 10,800-square-foot Islamic center, which will include a 4,200-square-foot multipurpose hall, which will be used for religious services, educational events, youth activities and social services.

"If you look across the Twin Cities, we would be one of the bigger ones," Ali said, "but nationally we're very small."

The center will primarily be used for Friday worship services, weekend school and weekend social events.

Services are typically attended by 150 to 200 people and weekend events typically serve the same, but not all the same people, Ali said.

"We don't have a formal membership, people come and go," Ali said. "It'll be used seven days a week in some way or another."

In addition to the facility itself, the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro is also proposing to have a recreational area, near an existing house it purchased, for picnics, a community garden and other recreational activities.

About 20 acres of the property will continue to be used for agricultural purposes.

"We are part of the same community as you, we just happen to have a different faith," Ali said. "We want to build a longterm relationship and we invite all of you to come to our place and interact with us and see what we're all about."

The Islamic center would be open to people of all faiths and place a strong emphasis on social services, including a food shelf.

Members of the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro are raising \$500,000 to help fund the building project.

Ali said the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro is hoping to have the Islamic center completed before Ramadan in 2017, which will begin the end of May.

Standing-room only

Planning Commission voted on the CUP following a public hearing, which was standing-room only.

"Thank you everyone for being very civil," Planning Commission Chairwoman Barbara Ronningen said.

Afton City Clerk Kim Swanson Linner said she estimates that there were 67 people in attendance in the audience, which means that City Hall was at capacity, with 76, when factoring in commissioners and staff.

Even though the Planning Commission meeting didn't begin until 7 p.m. last Monday, City Hall was already at capacity 15 minutes before the meeting even started.

A Washington County Sheriff's Office deputy stood at the entrance to City Hall keeping count of the number of people in attendance.

Given the number of people in attendance, Ronningen made a point of laying out a few ground rules.

"Please limit comments to the land use, nothing else," she said, "and you know what I'm talking about."

While the majority of comments from the public related to the CUP application, such as lighting, noise, parking and traffic concerns, a few comments deviated from the land use but instead spoke about the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro itself.

"I encourage you to approve this application," Imam Asad Zaman said. "They do good work, they have gone out of their way to do interfaith dialogue, which we know is sorely needed."

"Having the mosque there is a real benefit to our community," Naima Khan said. "They helped me feel less socially isolated and discover my own religious identity."

Not all comments were as positive however.

"There's not a substantial Muslim community in Afton," Jay Sperry said. "This is an outside source."

Commission concerns

Following the public hearing commissioners had the opportunity to ask questions about the application, as well as share any comments or concerns about the project.

Commissioner Mark Nelson shared some concerns about the number of people that will be using the Islamic center on a regular basis.

"It sounds to me like there's a lot of activity on a rural residential lot," he said.

Commissioner Judy Seeberger said she doesn't see it as anything different from Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, which is located just up the road from the proposed center.

"There's people coming and going all the time," she said. "That's par for the course of what a house of worship is all about."

Nelson also made a comment regarding the Muslim tradition of having a "call to worship," which is essentially a form of song.

Ali indicated that the center will not have any amplified noise outside and all call-to-worship activities will occur inside the center.

However, Nelson raised the possibility of prohibiting any outside call to worship, whether it's amplified or not.

City Attorney Fritz Knaak advised that a regulation such as that would violate federal law.

"You can't prohibit speech or song based on the context," he said. "If someone wants to sing at the top of their lungs outside, you can't prohibit them."

Following Planning Commission's approval of the CUP the audience erupted into cheers.

The CUP application will next go before Afton City Council for approval at its April 19 meeting.

"I recognize the residents have concerns and these are all real planning concerns," said Jaylani Hussein, from Council on American-Islamic Relations, who spoke during the public hearing. "There is change coming to Afton and it's something that the Muslim community is celebrating and we hope it's something that the Afton community can celebrate.

"It's a question of welcoming a new neighbor."