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## Afton sets welcoming tone for east metro Muslims

**Bob Collins** April 20, 2016, 8:10 AM

Given the drumbeat of stories of Islamophobia in the country right now, what's been happening in Afton has been a breath of fresh air.

Since the Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro announced weeks ago that it wanted to leave its too-small location in Woodbury and build a mosque in Afton, the reaction has been uplifting.

“I liked all of them and look forward to having them in our community,” Afton Mayor Richard Bend said of his meeting with members of the mosque in March. “We’re talking about very highly educated, successful members of our wonderful American population whose concern is to see their children well-educated.”

That did something that a lot of politicians have failed at in the nation recently: It set a welcoming tone.

Last night the City Council in Afton approved the plans for the mosque, which will be built on a former hobby farm along I-94.

The Pioneer Press' Mary Divine reports that when the vote was taken, the crowd erupted into applause and many of the Afton residents who attended stayed after the meeting to welcome their new neighbors.

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.”

It’s not as if there weren’t opponents, however. One resident said it’ll reduce property values. Another said she won’t be able to hear birds anymore because of all the kids who’ll be outside playing.

But for the most part, Afton has shown itself an enlightened land.

“I’m now old enough to know that there are several pathways to God,” said Dave 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.”

The Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro is hoping to have the Islamic center completed before Ramadan in 2017.

### **About the blogger**



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Bob Collins was with Minnesota Public Radio from 1992-2019. He was senior editor of news in the '90s, ran MPR's political unit, created the MPR News regional website, invented the popular Select A Candidate, started several blogs, and every day lamented that his Minnesota Fantasy Legislature project never caught on.