

Afton City Council approves land-use plan for mosque construction.
Backers say it will help foster religious freedom.
By Kevin Giles Star Tribune

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Many of the people who went to Afton City Hall Tuesday night to watch the City Council approve a proposed mosque supported it as a stroke for religious freedom. A few who opposed the idea asked why the Islamic Society wanted to build in rural Washington County. But a 5-0 council vote sealed the deal.

“My community has really been hard at work making all this right,” said Naaima Khan of Woodbury, a member of the mosque. “I think we did a decent job of answering any concerns that folks had.”

The Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro, a growing congregation of mostly professional workers, will build the 10,500-square-foot mosque at 12585 Hudson Road, near Interstate 94, in hopes of opening in May 2017 in time for Ramadan.

It will be built on one corner of a 29-acre parcel, most of which will be leased for farming.

Members began worshiping in a 2,500-square-foot office space in Woodbury in 2009 and moved to a larger space two years later, but they wanted a gathering place of their own, said Irfan Ali, an engineer at Medtronic and a member of the Woodbury Planning Commission.

The land-use permit typically required for a mosque — or any building project — is routine as city government matters go, but this week’s vote came amid broader statements about constitutional rights to religious liberty and assembly.

“I would bet that everyone in this room has ancestors who came here to avoid religious bigotry and persecution,” said Carol Ellingson of Afton. “I believe we should live the values that we preach to others.”

David Nimmer, a Woodbury resident who lived 18 years in Afton, said he’s “old enough to know there are several pathways to God and I would welcome our Muslim brothers and sisters on that journey.”

But Afton resident Patricia Swanson referred to the Islamic Society’s presence as “an invasion” and said it would have “damaging effects” on the city.

“None of the residents of the Afton community have requested this structure to be built. This means that the pressure to erect it is coming from outside the city of Afton as well as its funding,” she said.

Islamic Society members are raising \$500,000 from within their local community to help fund the building project, Ali said.

Some residents raised concerns about noise and lights, which City Council members addressed in their resolution.

The mosque will have two minarets, both shorter than the maximum height allowed in Afton for church spires. No music or calls to worship will be broadcast outside the building, and the Islamic Society will plant trees to screen the mosque from neighboring houses.

The congregation also must secure permits from the Valley Branch Watershed District and the Minnesota Department of Transportation; approval of final drainage, landscaping and lighting plans; and a building permit, said City Administrator Ron Moore.

About 200 members will worship in the mosque on Fridays, and weekend activities will include classes for children. Membership is about one-tenth that of a Lutheran church down the road, a city planning document said.

Ali said Wednesday that the Islamic Society was thankful for the many Afton residents who came to the council meeting in support of the mosque.

“We are a part of this community,” he said. “We really look forward to moving on to the next step and having a home out here.”