

Islamic Society proposes building mosque in Afton near Interstate 94

Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro would build it on 29 acres; \$500,000 needs to be raised for project.

By Kevin Giles Star Tribune

The Islamic Society of Woodbury-East Metro, a growing congregation of mostly professional workers, wants to build a 10,500-square-foot mosque on rural acreage in Afton.

"Our kids need a place for educational and social growth," said spokesman Irfan Ali. "We need to have a place more permanent for us."

The mosque, which Ali described as a "modest project," would be built on a former hobby farm at 12585 Hudson Road, near a Lutheran church off Interstate 94. Most of the 29 acres of land would be leased for farming, he said.

Members are raising \$500,000 to help fund the building project. The proposal goes before the Afton planning commission for a public hearing at 7 p.m. Monday at city hall and a City Council review may follow on April 19.

The Islamic Society began worshipping in a 2,500-square-foot office space in Woodbury in 2009 and moved to a larger space two years later.

But the congregation grew to the point where it wanted a gathering place of its own, said Ali, an engineer at Medtronic who designs software for medical implants.

He said the mosque would be open to people of all faiths and place a strong emphasis on social services, including a food shelf. Others "will see us as any other community members," Ali said

Afton Mayor Richard Bend said the mosque would be "an elegant building" that would complement in appearance the neighboring Lutheran church.

Several people have said they would welcome a mosque in Afton, said Bend, who met recently with representatives of the Islamic Society.

"I liked all of them and look forward to having them in our community," Bend said. "We're talking about very highly educated, successful members of our wonderful American population whose concern is to see their children well-educated."

In terms of land use, Bend said the proposal "appears to me ... [to meet] all the requirements of the zoning district where they want to build the mosque."

It's not a proposal to change a zoning ordinance or debate Islam, he said, although "it would not surprise me if we got some people from out of town who are highly reactive, given international conflicts."

Ali said that Islamic Society members are deeply rooted in the east metro area and western Wisconsin. Many of them are second- and third-generation Americans who work for 3M and other major employers.

"We are just part of the community," said Ali, who came to Minnesota in 1994.