

Mosque construction will start again in Spring

Fund raiser in May will pay for steel beams, roof

By Andrew J. Manuse

MANCHESTER -- Volunteers building a mosque for the Islamic Society of Greater Manchester on Karatzas Avenue will begin leveling the ground around the site within the next few weeks, the first work on the project since October, according to Zahid Malik, chairman of the building committee.

"If you can imagine, this is a community-driven project," Malik said. "We don't have all the funding we need. It comes in phases. It's donation-based, so we do it based on the funding we have from the community."

The foundation for what will be New Hampshire's only mosque was finished at the end of September, and volunteers also cleared trees around the site around that time.

To date, the society has spent about \$700,000 to \$800,000 on an estimated \$2 million project, according to Malik. The society will hold a fundraiser in May to collect money for the building's steel columns and roof dome, which it will erect next, he said. The cost of steel has gone up, which could set the project back some, he said.

"If funding is not an issue, I believe we will have it done this year," Malik said.

When it's finished, the mosque, which is known in Arabic as a "Masjid," will be a 13,000-square-foot structure on about 4 acres of land. It will include a 3,000-square-foot basement for classrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen and storage; a 7,000-square-foot hall on the main floor for worship; and a 3,000-square-foot balcony for women worshipers, Malik said. There will be a 65-space parking lot outside the mosque, he said.

Builders have faced some opposition from neighboring residents, who haven't allowed the society's all-volunteer laborers to work on the weekends, which has also set the project back, according to Mahboubul Hassan, Ph.D., president of the society.

"We dream of a place where people of all religions can come," Hassan said. "All religions teach 'Love thy neighbor,' but how many practice that?"

Members are predominantly Sunni, but Hassan said the body welcomes anyone, even Jews and Christians.

Hassan said the society wants a formal place where Muslims can practice their Friday worship services and participate in routine prayer during the week. The society also

wants a place where Muslim parents can send their children to learn about their religion and morality.

"You have to receive religion, because at schools you can't teach religion," Hassan said. "So somewhere you have to get that. You get that from synagogues, churches and mosques."

The Islamic society has its roots in a Muslim student group at Southern New Hampshire University founded in 1987 by a Saudi Arabian national, Sheikh Ahmed Shedi. The group operated out of an apartment first, then university space until 1997 and 1998. Around then, an influx of refugees from Bosnia, Iraq and other Islamic countries prompted the formation of the society and an expansion into about 3,000 square feet of office space at 228 Maple St., where it is currently based. Hassan was involved with its founding.

With the society growing to about 90 members and lacking a formal place for religious education, its leaders decided to build the mosque on Karatzas Avenue, he said.

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