

Judge removes roadblock to mosque

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MANCHESTER -- A Hillsborough County Superior Court judge has removed a legal roadblock that stood in the way of construction of New Hampshire's first Islamic mosque, on Karatzas Avenue off Wellington Road.

The Islamic Society of Greater Manchester, which has been trying to build a mosque since 1999, obtained city permits in 2003 to build a 13,085-square-foot mosque on a site it owns on Bald Hill. But abutters Milton and Sally Healy Argeriou, 300 Karatzas Ave., contested the approval in court, claiming the mosque site did not meet setback requirements. The Argerious argued that by virtue of a previous court case, they own the entire width of a never-constructed "street" called Ingraham Avenue that existed only on old city maps. They said the Islamic Society had no legal right to any part of the street and alleged the project was trespassing on their property.

The Islamic Society contended that the Argerious owned only to the mid-line of the street and the society owned the other half. Judge Carol Ann Conboy agreed. "Each side owns to the center line," said the Islamic organization's attorney, Andrew H. Sullivan. He said the ruling means the Islamic Society now "can pick up their building permits" and start construction. Sullivan said the mosque project required only four feet of the old "paper" street, and the court confirmed that the mosque owns a 20-foot wide section of the street. If the judge had ruled against the Islamic Society, it would have had to ask the zoning board for a variance to the frontage and setback requirements, Sullivan said.

Homeowners on Karatzas Avenue have tried to block the project because they object to the traffic it will bring and because the city did not require the mosque to pay for improvements to Karatzas Avenue, which residents say is in deplorable condition. The Argerious' attorney, Robert E. Murphy Jr., said the court ruling clarifies the court's prior decree on the paper street. Asked if his clients would appeal, Murphy said, "That's still under consideration."

The Islamic Society of Greater Manchester first proposed the mosque in 1999. The organization sued the city after the proposal was twice rejected by the zoning board on the grounds that Karatzas Avenue was not an accepted city street. The city eventually agreed not to block the project for that reason. Islamic Society leaders did not return telephone calls yesterday. In a previous report, a spokesman for the group said the structure would have a dome, but no minaret or loudspeakers.

Muslims seek a place of their own. Misunderstandings about women's role. Muslim primer

BYLINE: SHAWNE K. WICKHAM Sunday News Staff **DATE:** March 19, 2000 **PUBLICATION:** New Hampshire Sunday News (Manchester, NH)

THEY BELIEVE in family values, in the brotherhood of mankind, in a just and merciful God, the Creator of the universe, and in his Word handed down through the prophets. They trust in a day of judgment, and for the righteous, the rewards of a heaven filled with beauty and fulfillment. They live their faith through prayer, fasting and charity to the poor. They desire to instill in their children religious beliefs and heritage, to raise them as moral, upright members of their communities. And they long for a church of their own.

These are New Hampshire's Muslims, a faith community with a growing presence in the state, estimated at between 2,000 and 3,000. They come from a host of countries—Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Kurdistan, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Sudan, Bosnia—but they share one faith as followers of Islam. "The common thread joins us so nicely," says Dr. Shuja Saleem, a native of Pakistan who is on the board of the Islamic Society of Greater Manchester. "It's a multi-colored tapestry, which serves us very well."

The Islamic Society, which incorporated in 1998, has purchased 2.75 hilltop acres in Manchester to build a mosque, where Muslims could come for daily prayer, fellowship and religious education. However, the city's zoning board of adjustment refused to grant a variance to allow the mosque to be built. The Islamic Society appealed the board's ruling without success, and is appealing in Hillsborough County Superior Court. Members of the society say their mosque would be more than a house of worship. They envision families gathering at what would serve as a community center, children playing in the backyard and attending religion classes.

Professor Mahboubul Hassan is president of the board of trustees for the ISGM, and a professor of economics and finance at New Hampshire College. A native of Bangladesh, he moved here to teach at NHC in 1986. "We want to teach morality to our kids, so they can grow up to be better citizens," Hassan said. "I think every family in America wants that. That's what every religion teaches."

Street at issue : The city board's reason for denying the society's request was that the road where the mosque is proposed, Karatzas Avenue, is not a "publicly accepted street"—despite the fact that the highway department maintains it and police patrol regularly. At night, ISGM board members said, the area becomes a haven for drug activity and vandalism, evidenced by the graffiti that desecrates a small Greek Orthodox stone shrine erected by the previous owners. Hassan said the Muslim community wants to improve the neighborhood; several families have bought nearby lots, hoping to build homes once the mosque is built. "We told the city: With God's grace we'll make it beautiful, so the city can be proud of it," he said.

Hassan said the Islamic Society has begun approaching architects to design the mosque, although it may be well over a year before the appeal process is complete. And while they wait for a legal resolution, the faithful make do with facilities at New Hampshire College, which for years has donated space for worship services. Nearly 200 Muslims gathered Thursday inside the college gymnasium for Eid ul-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice. While four rows of men and, a distance behind them, three rows of women alternately stood and bowed to pray, small children of many races cavorted nearby, their exuberance occasionally breaking out into squeals and laughter. No one seemed to mind.

Eid ul-Adha is one of the most important Islamic feast days, the conclusion of the Hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are obligated to make at least once in their lifetimes. Dr. Saleem, an obstetrician at Parkland Medical Center in Derry, is among the estimated 10,000 Muslims from the United States who traveled to Saudi Arabia for this year's Hajj. Prayers in Arabic: The Eid ul-Adha prayers are conducted in the traditional Arabic, although many Muslims from other regions may not understand the language, explained Salman Malik, a Concord oral surgeon who attended with his wife, Romana, and their three children.

"It's like speaking Latin in church, the same concept. The Koran is not really encouraged to be read in any other language other than Arabic," Malik explained. "This way it doesn't get changed. This is the way it was 1,000 years ago, everything the same." In an interview before he left for the Hajj, Saleem explained prayer is a pillar of Islam, along with fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, works of charity and pilgrimage.

The purpose of daily prayer, he explained, is to stay in touch with a Creator who is "always there, that you can seek his help and guidance." The mosque becomes a focal point for this daily touchstone. And beyond that, Saleem said, is the community aspect. "People meet together, they find out how their neighbors are doing, if somebody's sick, somebody's needy." As Thursday's prayer service ended, the men embraced each other, smiling and exchanging holiday greetings, "Eid mubarak." The youngsters were first to the feast table, although most opted for the donut holes and potato chips instead of the samosas, meat and potato filled triangles native to Bangladesh and India.

All Muslims are brothers, the prayer leader, Ibrahim Imam of Somerville, Mass., had told the faithful gathered, and this sentiment was evident as people from more than a dozen cultures intermingled. Mumtaz Ambar moved to this country four months ago with his wife and three children, political refugees from Iraq. Gesturing to the crowd around him, he pointed out people from the continents of Africa, Europe and Asia. "This is the ideal of Islam," he said, smiling.

Gatherings like this are important, he said, "because you find someone sharing your ideas, your beliefs, and this type of grouping between different nationalities and ethnic groups." "It means everywhere you are home," Ambar said. Faith sustained him: His Muslim faith has sustained him through the pain of leaving his home and his radiology practice, to start again in a foreign land. "Faith in God is the most important thing," he said. "Without it, you can't face the problems which you have in your life."

Khalil El-Rayah of Manchester moved here from Sudan 13 years ago. He works in the overseas office at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, where he said there are many prayer services he can attend, in mosques, universities and even the hospital itself. Building a mosque in Manchester, he said, will not only give Muslims here a place to pray, educate their children and build a library. "To have a mosque, that also will introduce Islam to other people," he said. "We'd like people to know us, what we actually believe," said Saleem.

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Many Westerners know little about Muslims -- or worse, harbor stereotypes and misconceptions -- and many are surprised to learn how much of both Judaism and Christianity are incorporated in Islam, Saleem said. "We believe in the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Believing in the prophets who are prophets of Christians is an article of our faith. We believe God Almighty sent his messengers to all people. "We are obligated as Muslims to believe all his previous messages as much as the most recent one that we actually follow," he said. "Our faith in the Bible is as fundamental as our faith in the Qur'an (Koran)."

As Nasim Malik, who was visiting her son's family here from New York City for the holy days, puts it, "We are not Muslim until we respect all the prophets -- including the prophet Moses and Jesus Christ. If we respect them, then we are Muslim." Indeed, for anyone schooled in the Judeo-Christian tradition, there was a familiar ring to the message imparted by the imam for Eid ul-Adha: "Remember, one day you will appear before Allah and answer for your deeds, so beware," he told those gathered. "Do not stray from the path of righteousness." Sayed El-Siah is a surgical oncologist at St. Joseph Hospital in Nashua and treasurer of the Islamic Society. Egyptian by birth, he leads Muslim services at New Hampshire College every Friday, the Sabbath in Islam.

Misconceptions: El-Siah contends too many people equate Muslims with terrorists or extremists. "They take the actions of one Muslim person and they get a stereotype of all Muslims," he said. But in fact, he said, "When you apply the Islamic moral code, you can get along with anyone. It calls for decency, honesty, no matter who the person you're dealing with." And, Saleem added, "The concept of neighbor is not just Muslim neighbors. Anybody is your neighbor." But Saleem said some fault for these misconceptions and stereotypes lies as well with those who purport to practice Islam, but fall short of its sacred obligations. "There's not a single country in the world that is living Islam the way it is supposed to be," he contended. "Human rights in Islam are very, very strongly advocated and supported," he said. "There is no right to take away any person's rights, because no one gives them those rights. It's given by God Almighty; what he gave, nobody can take away."

Misunderstandings about women's role.

Muslim men and women alike say one of the most common misunderstandings about Islam is the role of women. Mahboubul Hassan, a New Hampshire College professor, explained, "Islam does not actually hold gender as a source of difference. There is no inequality in gender in the sight of God." "It's very plain that people will be judged by their character, by their piety, not by what they are," he said.

And Sayed El-Siah, a Nashua surgeon who leads Friday prayer services at the college, said the tradition of women covering their heads appears in the Torah and the Bible long before the Qur'an, or Koran. "If you look at practicing Jewish women, they are covered," he said. But he said many interpret this expression of faith as a lack of freedom. "My wife was at the mall and a woman came up and said, 'Why don't you get liberated?' She was raised here in Salem, New Hampshire!" "She answered her nicely: 'I don't see myself lacking anything. I have my husband and my children. Why do you think I'm not liberated?' The woman had no answer," El-Siah said. Her choice to wear the "hijab," the traditional veil, is "very simple," said Romana Malik of Concord, the mother of three. "It's between Allah and me."

Maria Butt of Manchester said she was raised "a strict Catholic" in Spain. But she said she was always troubled by the different versions of the Christian Bible that exist. When she met a group of Muslims at college, she said, "They started talking to me about Islam, and I realized that is what I was believing all along." To her, the veil offers "protection" for women. "When men look at a woman that is wearing the hijab, a man doesn't feel tempted, and that woman will be safe," she explained. And she noted in Christianity, "The Virgin Mother was also covered."

"If women in Islam were oppressed, I would not have converted," Butt said. "Women in Islam have a lot more respect than in a lot of other religions. You do not have to go to work, but you can go to work if you want. A man is supposed to care for his wife and children. "That's Islam, and Islam is a beautiful thing."

Muslim primer

Islam is considered one of the three great monotheistic faiths of the world, along with Judaism and Christianity. It was founded in Arabia in the 7th century AD, based on the teachings of Muhammad, who is called the Prophet. One who practices Islam is called a Muslim. The Qur'an, or Koran, a collection of passages revealed to Muhammad during the 22 years of his prophetic life (610-632) is regarded as the word of God.

A Muslim house of worship is called a mosque. Muslims have five spiritual duties, known as the "pillars of Islam:"

- Profession of faith: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet."
- Prayer: Offered five times daily facing Mecca, before sunrise, in the early afternoon, in late afternoon, immediately after sunset and before retiring (before midnight). A single unit of prayer consists of a standing posture, then a genuflection followed by two prostrations, and finally a sitting posture. Prescribed prayers and portions of the Qur'an are recited.
- Almsgiving.
- Fasting: During the month of Ramadan, Muslims must refrain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset.
- Pilgrimage (Hajj): Every adult Muslim who is physically and economically able to do so must make a pilgrimage to the Kaaba, the central shrine of Islam at Mecca in Saudi Arabia, at least once in his or her lifetime.

The Muslim world population is estimated at 1.1 billion people. There are an estimated 3.9 million Muslims in the United States.

(Sources: Funk and Wagnalls New Encyclopedia, Time Almanac 1999, and Scripps Howard News Service)

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