

County panel OKs mosque over neighbors' complaints

by Jennifer Wadsworth / Tracy Press

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Plans to build a mosque on an empty lot just north of Tracy have run into opposition from about 50 neighbors who worry that it would worsen traffic and overwhelm local utilities.

Despite the dissent, San Joaquin County planning commissioners approved a 2½-acre site at the corner of Corral Hollow and Larch roads for the Tracy Islamic Center to erect a 13,800-square-foot building.

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Because the future mosque will be paid for by donations alone, planners estimate that construction will take a decade. When finished, it will be the first mosque in Tracy built from the ground up — the first building in the city of 83,000 constructed for that very purpose.

Architects plan to build 6,000 square feet during the first phase and then add on a library, community rooms and an expansion of the main multipurpose room during a second phase, as funding permits.

It's now up to the congregation to raise the money, though exactly how much remains to be seen. The nonprofit Islamic center's director, Mohammad Arain, said the county's approval was long-awaited and much-needed.

"We have many, many more families now in our congregation," he said. "We want a place where we can comfortably pray and where the community has more room to come together."

Arain has watched his congregation of Tracy Muslims quickly outgrow its meeting place off Larch Road, a few lots down from where the group plans to relocate. From a gathering of fewer than a dozen people 10 years ago, the group has swelled to include more than 150 members.

Those members meet in an old, stuffy house to worship. During the holy month of Ramadan and other religious observances, the center must rent halls at local schools or community centers to accommodate the influx of worshippers, who sometimes number as many as 600. With a mosque of their own, that would no longer be necessary.

On Friday this week, during obligatory prayer, an overflow crowd of 50 or so Muslims kneeled under a rickety wooden porch in the afternoon's 101-degree heat as the imam began his invocation. Another 100 worshippers crowded inside the sweltering house-mosque.

For several years, the center has been ready to move into a bigger meeting place, Arain said. The organization needs more space for worship but also a place that symbolizes permanence and tradition for Tracy Muslims.

"We pray in a certain direction, toward Mecca, as tradition requires," Arain said. "And when this mosque is built, it will face Mecca, so people can see a symbol of our faith."

A rendering of the place shows a stucco building with no minaret but three rounded towers and an expansive, two-story community room. The mosque will sit at a 19.8-degree angle on the lot to face Mecca, birthplace of Islam's founder, the Prophet Muhammad, in Saudi Arabia.

But several dozen neighbors on Larch Road have signed a petition that opposes the project, because, they said, it would overwhelm the area's septic system and bring in unwanted traffic.

"We are concerned with the addition of yet another facility on this road that it will only compound the existing traffic problems," wrote Stephen and Trudi Schweiger in an April 3 letter to county planning commissioners.

The Schweigers own a plumbing company they run from their Larch Road home. The road, already home to half a dozen churches, handles enough traffic for a country lane, Trudi Schweiger said.

"We have nothing against the mosque, except that it's too much for this neighborhood," she said this week, echoing the sentiment of dozens of her neighbors.

Arain has invited the public to join him at meetings to talk about the traffic issue, which he said stems from the misconception that a new congregation plans to build a mosque, instead of the same group relocating down the street.

"We're the same people who just want more space," he said. "We just need a place to gather that is safe and, more important, that is symbolic of our tradition and faith."

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News

MUSLIMS LOOKING FORWARD TO BRIGHTER FUTURE IN TRACY

By **Jennie Rodriguez**

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Record Staff Writer

TRACY - Overflowing worshippers gather in a patio outside a small residential building with boarded-up windows that now serves as the Tracy Islamic Center.

The tiny former living room is too small to accommodate the worshippers at many of the five-times-a-day prayer sessions.

But the future holds stained glass windows, dome rooftops and ample space at Corral Hollow and Larch roads.

County planners recently approved the site that will become a 13,800-square-foot mosque with a library, multipurpose hall and community rooms.

"We are looking for something beautiful, safe and respectfully located, so we can invite our neighbors," said Mohammad Arain, president of the center.

Some of those neighbors opposed the project when it was initially proposed. Mostly they were concerned about traffic. Arain said mosque leaders met with those residents to clear up a misunderstanding that a new group was moving in.

"I'm really appreciative to our neighbors and our planning commissioners," Arain said.

Neighbor Steve Schweiger said he is still concerned about heavier traffic, which he says has been increasing in recent years on Larch Road, which is home to about a half-dozen churches. He believes that a larger center will draw even more people.

"I don't want it here," Schweiger, 52, said. "But it is what it is."

Tracy Islamic Center, currently at 11299 W. Larch Road, has outgrown its existing 1,000 square feet just east of where the new center will be. The planned building "is a real community need," Arain said, since membership has grown from a few dozen to 150 in the past 10 years.

It's the third major new Islamic Center or mosque planned in San Joaquin County. An Islamic Center is planned in Lodi and a mosque in Morada.

Now that the converted house in Tracy can no longer accommodate all those who come to prayer, the overflowing worshippers gather on a patio outside of the center. When they run out of room there, they congregate in a shaded area beyond.

"This place is very small," said Tariq Khan, a 39-year-old Tracy resident. "People pray outside in the parching sun."

Sabeen Fatima, who is married to Khan, said a larger mosque will benefit future generations, such as the couple's three children, ages 1 to 7.

"It also helps to beautify the area," Arain said.

Currently, the congregation rents classrooms at local schools on Sunday for children's religious studies.

They also rent halls for special events, such as Ramadan, the Islamic observance of the day the Quran, the

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Muslims looking forward to brighter fu...

Muslim religious text, was said to have been revealed to Islam's founder, the Prophet Muhammad, according to tradition.

"Building a mosque will help accommodate everything," said Muhammad Nazir, secretary of the center.

The future mosque, Tracy's first multifunctional Islamic center to be constructed for its purpose, will be paid for by donations from the worshippers. They will build slowly, as the donations come in.

So far, they've spent \$80,000 to \$90,000 on fees and traffic studies, Arain said.

Mosque leaders estimate the building will be complete in 10 years, as donations are collected. Construction on the multipurpose hall could begin by next summer if building permits and enough funding is obtained, Arain said.

In the future, mosque leaders plan to add community rooms, a library and a second floor of classrooms.

The mosque will face Saudi Arabia's Mecca, as is Islamic custom.

Some of the new neighbors said they didn't mind the new mosque.

"I'm happy there will be a parking lot, because the streets get so crowded when people from all the churches park in front of houses," said Zahida Niazmand, 64.

"God is everyone's God," she said.

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