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Uneasy Feelings Moving In

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Muslim Sect's Proposal for Extensive Center Unsettles Small Frederick County Town

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Walkersville

is a town of corn farmers and high school football, where American flags hang over front porches guarded by scarecrows and dotted with pumpkins.

Nestled near the foothills of the [Appalachian Mountains](#) on the rural outskirts of [Frederick](#), it has so many churches that some residents call it "God's Country," and many of them are praying that this hamlet of 5,500 will be able to stop a proposed development.

A [Silver Spring](#)-based Muslim sect has proposed buying the town's largest farm to build a retreat and Islamic worship center that would host up to 10,000 people annually for a national religious convention.

Under the proposal, the 224-acre farm's colonial-era house, once occupied by the town's founding father, John Walker, would be converted into living space for an imam and other clergy from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA. The main prayer and recreation center would be topped with a 65-foot spire, piercing a sky now marked by church steeples and a water tower.

Public outcry against the worship center has been so intense that some town officials are maneuvering to adopt zoning law amendments that could block the project. The town's planning commission will vote tonight on an ordinance to prohibit building places of worship and private clubs on land zoned for agriculture. On Nov. 1, the town's board of appeals will hold a final public hearing and could vote whether to allow the Ahmadiyya community to build its retreat on the property, which is zoned for agriculture.

"It's quite the controversy, and, I think, unfortunately it's become a religious controversy," said Chad W. Weddle, a Town Commission member.

For their part, the Ahmadiyya community has launched an aggressive public relations campaign to introduce itself to townspeople and educate them about the Muslim faith.

"We're trying to reach out to them, to let them know who we are, where we come from and what we want to do," said Syed Ahmad, who is managing the project.

Others in town said they worry about the traffic that the annual retreats would bring and the strain on the water supply and services.

Legally, the town's hands are tied. Making land-use decisions on religious or racial grounds is unconstitutional, and the town can deny the sect's proposal only if there are legitimate concerns about traffic, infrastructure or planning.

The Ahmadiyya community's quest to build in Walkersville has led to one of the latest examples of local opposition to Muslim groups trying to build facilities to accommodate growing congregations across the nation.

The Ahmadiyya community, which looked at more than 50 properties in the mid-Atlantic region, was attracted to the Walkersville site because it is just an hour's drive north of Washington and close to such major highways as Interstate 70, said Syed Ahmad, who is managing the project.

The sect has negotiated to buy the farm contingent upon the town government approving the development plans, said the farm's owner, David Moxley. Neither party would disclose terms of the sale.

Since settling on Walkersville, the Ahmadiyya community -- which is distinct from the larger Sunni and Shiite sects -- has bought advertisements in the local newspaper and sent representatives door-to-door to talk with residents. When a family lost its barn to a fire, some of the sect's leaders brought flowers and food.

"It looks like one of those small towns that you have in America, and I think people there just don't know us and they're trying to find out," Ahmad said.

But the sect's efforts seem to have done little to assuage concerns in Walkersville, a politically conservative town that is 96 percent white. Talk of the proposal has exposed the sensitivities of many residents, who have said they feel uneasy about the prospect of so many Muslims establishing a presence in their town -- even if only to worship.

Some say they worry the Islamic visitors would be intolerant of the Christian faith that runs through the tree-lined streets of Walkersville.

"My problem is with the way they view the Christian faith," said David Stull, 50, a woodcutter and produce salesman who has lived in Walkersville since [Lyndon Johnson](#) was president. "They dislike Christians; they dislike our fundamental beliefs," he continued. "I do believe it's going to cause a big problem here because of their hatred toward our views."

Intisar Abbasi, 60, who lives in Frederick and commutes to Silver Spring to worship at the Ahmadiyya mosque, said he hopes his fellow Muslims will become a part of Walkersville. "I love the community, and the people are wonderful," Abbasi said. "I'm not surprised there are people who are angry, but, you know, that's part of the process."

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, unnerved folks in this small town, just as they did people across America. Some residents' emotions are still raw, and they say they fear the Ahmadiyya retreat could become a breeding ground for terrorists.

"I'm not in favor of that group being this close," said David "Reds" Main, standing behind the counter at the duckpin bowling alley he has run since the 1970s.

"They have a right to their religion like anybody else," he said. "But it goes back to 9/11 to get the trust back and convince yourself that not all Muslims are terrorists."

Sharon Eyler, 58, was born and raised in Walkersville, owns a flower shop and is a regular at church. If anyone has the ear of the town, she does.

Eyler said townspeople are wondering whether the Islamic retreat will make Walkersville a terrorist target. "You know, since 9/11 happened, how can anybody think anything but that?" she said.

"It's funny that everybody wants to hesitate saying what we're saying," Eyler said. But, she added, "if you could go to every household and go behind those doors, that's what you'd find."

Town officials say the opposition has little to do with religion. They'll tell you the voices in protest would be just as loud if a Baptist group wanted to build a retreat on the John Walker farm or a developer wanted to build a subdivision of tract houses there.

"From a town's standpoint, when I'm going to tell you I'm going to bring double your population to a convention, I don't think anybody wants that," said Weddle, the Town Commission member. "Whether its 10,000 [Girl Scouts](#) or 10,000 Methodists or 10,000 whatever, in a town of 5,000, those numbers cause concern."

Some residents think the town should allow the worship center, whose plans include two large gymnasiums and other recreational facilities, which the sect will make available for everyone in Walkersville.

Gloria Staley, 83, who has lived in Walkersville since 1942 and owns a beauty shop on Maple Avenue, said the Ahmadiyya community could do good for the town. "These are people who will do what they say they'll do with the town and do all they can for Walkersville," she said. "I just don't see how we can keep them out. I don't think that's fair. To me, it's like discriminating against them."

Butch Riley, who fled the "rat race" of [Montgomery County](#) 14 years ago, said he worries about losing the open feel he found in Walkersville.

"The whole world doesn't need city. We need country," Riley said, standing on the porch of his rambler, which overlooks the farm that would become the Muslim retreat. "They want to build a city. It starts with one building and the next thing you know, it's more and more buildings."

The town's burgess, or mayor, is a sandy-haired man who cuts an imposing figure. Born and raised in Walkersville, Ralph Whitmore, 60, spends his days next to the railroad tracks selling animal feed and birdseed out of a store no bigger than a bedroom.

Leaning back in his green chair, Whitmore welcomed a reporter one recent morning with a sales pitch.

"I can feed you anything but a snake or an emu," he said, laughing. "You know what an emu is? It looks like an ostrich. A very big bird."

Whitmore said he is careful not to take a position on the Muslim sect's proposal before the council votes, but it's easy to guess what he thinks.

"This town is not very diversified," he said. "You know what I mean? We're sitting back here off the radar scope and living in our little piece of heaven."

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