

DIOCESAN NEWS

Town planning board deals blow to mosque

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — A unanimous vote by the Town Planning Board Aug. 25 dealt a fatal blow to a proposal by the Turkish Society of Rochester to build a mosque on Brower Road next to St. Cecilia's Church, 2732 Culver Road.

The vote reflected widespread opposition in the town to the proposed mosque. Earlier in the year, local religious leaders in the community — including the pastors of St. Cecilia's and St. Salome's churches — had issued a statement supporting the mosque proponents' right to build in Irondequoit.

Fulfilling a state mandate to assess a proposal's environmental impact, the board's seven members approved a motion stating that the mosque would create undue traffic and safety hazards in the residential area in which it was to be located.

Although the board still has to vote on the building application, Richard Barone, board chairman, indicated the Aug. 25 vote probably doomed that request.

"You could argue that in most cases ... it could lead to a denial of the application," he said of the vote.

The proposal called for the mosque to be built on 2.7 acres of a 9-acre plot east of Culver Road, a main road. It would have replaced one currently housed in a large trailer at the headquarters of the 250-member Turkish Society, 2841 Culver Road.

A mosque proponent said he believed the planning board was biased against the society's proposal, which has been submitted in various forms for more than three years.

"I still strongly believe that from the very beginning, the idea was to deny it, not to look at it," said Utku Kanik, chairman of a construction committee overseeing the mosque proposal.

But the planning board chairman said that the board has continually had to query the society's members for information, especially because they did not adequately address the main issue — how the mosque would control the traffic it could generate.

"I have no problem approving a mosque in any area of Irondequoit ...," Barone said in an interview prior to the meeting. "The only question is: 'Can a particular size building in a particular size area be a traffic problem, a safety problem?'"

Kanik said the Turkish Society may take the issue to court if the planning board also votes against the building proposal.

"We'll explore all our options," he said.

The proposed mosque would be 3,668 square feet large, with a minaret 65 feet high from the ground, Kanik said. He noted that the current mosque draws overflow crowds of up to 300 people for Muslim holy days, even though it only holds a few less than 100 comfortably.

He added the new mosque was designed to accommodate 400 worshippers, but that a planning board review had deemed 525 a more accurate estimate. The mosque's proposed 175-car parking lot would have two exits, and most of the cars would leave via Brower Road, a two-lane road that intersects Culver, he said.

Carol Falzone, a St. Cecilia's parishioner, said she and her husband, Sam, and their two children live on the corner of Brower and Catalina Drive, directly across from the proposed mosque site. She said that cars to and from the proposed mosque's parking lot would block the access of her and her neighbor's vehicles to the street.

"The parking lot would be 90 feet from my bedroom," she said. "We're going to need a helicopter to get in and out of our streets."

At the meeting, several board members also noted that police vehicles, fire engines and ambulances would have difficulty getting into the area during service times. Barone said, for example, that studies have shown 100 cars leaving the mosque's parking lot after a service could take 90 minutes to completely exit onto Culver Road.

In a phone interview, Falzone expressed concern over medical vehicles reaching her 82-year-old mother, who lives two streets away from her, in an emergency.

"It's seconds that can make a difference in saving a life," Falzone said. "What do we say, 'The ambulance was held up 10 minutes, hold your heart attack?'"

But Kanik said the residents' fear of traffic was overstated — and that he is increasingly convinced some of the opposition is rooted in religious and ethnic bigotry.

He claimed that at least one resident referred to his fellow Muslims as "space aliens" at a planning board meeting, and that other residents have made similar derogatory remarks about his group.

Falzone adamantly rejected the charge that religious prejudice was the main factor behind the neighbors' opposition to the mosque. She acknowledged, however, that some residents may have made prejudicial remarks against Muslims.

"There may have been some ethnic



Greg Fiume

Women religious meet in diocese

About 200 women religious leaders met Aug. 20 at the Wesleyan Chapel, Seneca Falls, to tour women's rights landmarks and, above, to sing a litany honoring historically significant women. At left, Sister Marie Chin, RSM, symbolically weaves a tapestry of past and present women's lives. The women, joined by another 900 women religious, met Aug. 21-25 in Rochester for the national assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Members of Rochester's Sisters of Mercy and Sisters of St. Joseph leadership teams attended.



things said," she remarked. "I think people are just saying it out of anger and frustration ... If traffic wasn't a problem, the neighborhood would welcome (the mosque)."

Barone directly addressed the question of religious and ethnic prejudice.

"I have never heard from anyone, neither the residents, or on this board, that they have a problem with ... religion," he said at the Aug. 25 meeting.

Concerns that religious prejudice may have played a part in the mosque debate prompted the Irondequoit Ministerial Association, a 12-member ecumenical group, to release a statement to the planning board on April 28. Signatories included Fathers Walter Cushing, pastor of St. Cecilia's, and Father William Darling, pastor of St. Salome's.

Father Cushing said he signed the statement to show that he had no problem with another religious group building a worship center in the neighborhood. He added that one parishioner resigned from the parish upon learning that his pastor had signed the statement. Yet, Father Cushing acknowledged even he was concerned with the traffic a new mosque would create.

The statement referred to the Vatican II document, "On Human Dignity," that stated "religious communities also have the right not to be hindered by ... civil authority ... in erecting buildings for religious purposes ..."

"We hope that the Town of Irondequoit and its citizens will exercise tolerance and fairness in the matter of the Turkish Society's proposal to build a mosque in our community," the statement concluded.

Sister, priest mark golden jubilees

Sister Virginia Brien, SSND, and Father John Proppe, OFM Cap, both of whom have ties to the Diocese of Rochester, are both marking their golden jubilees in 1997.

A Rochester native, Sister Brien attended St. Andrew's School and graduated from St. Peter and Paul School. She attended a preparatory high school in New Jersey prior to entering the novitiate of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Baltimore July 16, 1946. She made her first profession July 31, 1947.

Sister Brien spent much of her early career in teaching and music ministry. Her only assignment in the diocese was as a teacher at St. Margaret Mary School, Rochester (1977-80). In 1981, she began teaching in the Diocese of Ikot Ekpen, Nigeria, and since 1991 has been serving in the bishop's office there.

Sister Brien was in Rochester this summer to visit family. A Mass of thanksgiving marking her jubilee was celebrated Aug. 2 at St. Francis of Assisi Church, Rochester.

Father Proppe served as chaplain at the

Canandaigua Veterans Administration Hospital from 1973 to 1985, while residing at St. Fidelis Friary in Interlaken. He had been ordained a priest June 4, 1947, in Marathon, Wis., having entered the Capuchin Franciscans Aug. 26, 1939.

From 1948 to 1969, he served as a missionary first in Okinawa, Japan, then on the Marianas Islands.

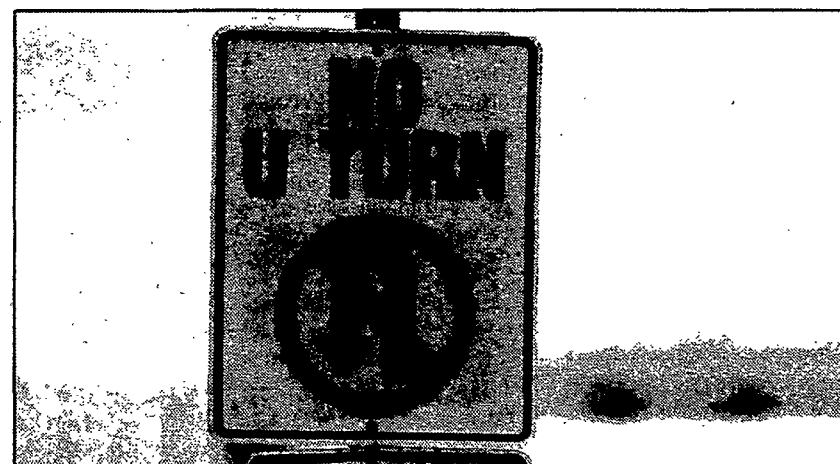
Since 1986, he has been serving as chaplain at the Rosary Hill Home in Hawthorne, N.Y. He marked his jubilee there with a celebration June 4, 1997.

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