

# A smokescreen for bigotry: Disguising anti-Muslim bias with land-use objections

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Sewage lines, traffic patterns and zoning ordinances. Meet the instruments of bigotry in America today.

It's happened three times in Virginia already, cases where development regulations and mundane municipal laws have been used to smokescreen surging Islamophobia.

And it's something new, something that folks who have lived in these communities for decades have never experienced.

"I would never believe in my life that something like this would happen," said Samer Shalaby, whose pointer-and-blueprints community meeting presentation went viral after audience members unleashed a bigoted, anti-Muslim shouting spree at him.

"Nobody, nobody, nobody wants your evil cult in this county," a man who said he was a former Marine yelled at Shalaby that night in November 2015.

Turns out the Islamic Center of Fredericksburg has been operating in Spotsylvania County for 28 years. And Shalaby's family has been there for 31. Until last year, they were viewed as neighbors. They were engineers, car salesmen, moms picking up their kids from soccer games or band practice.

But then Donald Trump began running for president, pledging to ban Muslims from entering the country and establish a registry for Muslim Americans.

It was amid that heated and ugly rhetoric that the center announced its expansion plans — and promptly ran into a wall of opposition. And now, a year later, the Islamic center is still tied up in traffic-pattern objections and subdivision squabbles.

In Culpeper, about 40 miles away, local officials rubber stamped pump-and-haul permits to handle sewage for businesses or houses of worship. The county board approved 26 of them since 1992, including nine for churches.

But when the Islamic Center of Culpeper bought a parcel of land and proposed a small mosque, a local Republican activist whipped the community in a frenzy over the sewage permit, which became a sneaky way to block the entire project.

"I understand the Islamic Center of Culpeper wishes to rehabilitate the existing home and use it on a weekly basis as a place of prayer. . . . HMMMMMMMMM," he wrote. And right after that — just like Fredericksburg — there was a raucous community meeting with abnormally high attendance, there was grandstanding and a round of applause after the board broke its quarter-century streak of issuing permits and denied that one.

Its decision was so ham-handed that the Justice Department hit Culpeper County with a lawsuit last month based on the Religious Land Use act. Justice has plenty of ammo on this case, from the emails sent out before the meeting to the communications that other board members got from folks opposing the mosque — emails that mentioned terrorists, not sewage.

And now we've got Nokesville.

About 200 Muslims who hold their prayers in rented hotel space in Manassas want to build their own space. It would be the Nokesville branch of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS), one of the country's largest and most prominent mosques. ADAMS has 11 chapters around Northern Virginia and the District.

They've been working with county officials for two years now on the building's height, lighting and parking on the parcel of land they bought. But that cooperation hasn't been enough for some opponents.

"No more suburban sprawl!" they say. And they're pushing their leaders to deny connection to the public sewage system the mosque would need.

Two churches recently got this very same approval. Churches.

Rizwan Jaka, chairman of the ADAMS board, told The Washington Post's Tara Bahrapour that the concern over sewage is a red herring and something he's seeing across the country.

"With over 30 mosques being prevented from being built based off of anti-Muslim bigotry or implicit bias wrapped in land-use arguments, that gives us some concern," he said.

The case in Fredericksburg really shows the ridiculous hoop-jumping that Muslims are facing.

When officials with the Islamic Center there bought a parcel of land a little ways out of town, they thought they'd be doing everyone a favor by keeping traffic out of town. Nope. Residents not only complained about traffic, but complained that the area wasn't appropriate for a religious facility.

"We're still fighting the battle, and still trying to be good Samaritans and good neighbors to everybody," said Shalaby, who is also a civil engineer.

So they offered to divide the 10 acres of land they bought for \$200,000 into single-family home sites and sell it like that, then use the proceeds to buy less than an acre of land, which will be about \$500,000, near their current site in town. That should keep traffic out of the neighborhoods, right?

"We gave them an option," he said.

They mailed 360 letters to residents, explained the plans and asked for input.

The problem now? Traffic. Again.

"We thought this would be a way to get past the unfortunate bigotry," Shalaby said.

"But a lot of us are having problems like this now. It's amazing. I never thought it would happen in this country."

*Petula is a columnist for The Washington Post's local team who writes about homeless shelters, gun control, high heels, high school choirs, the politics of parenting, jails, abortion clinics, mayors, modern families, strip clubs and gas prices, among other things.*

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