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Islamic Society of Vermont Seeks Expansion in Colchester to Accommodate Rise of Muslim Population in State

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About 15 years ago, a dozen or so leaders in the Vermont Islamic community had a dream. They envisioned a center where members of the faith could come together to pray, socialize and learn.

Since opening its doors in 1999, the Islamic Society of Vermont has far exceeded that goal. Imam Islam Hassan of Colchester was hired to lead worship full time; the Weekend Islamic School was established - so large it is now held off-site; the building was remodeled and community engagement has thrived in and outside of Masjid, or mosque, walls.

Religious services have grown so much that the prayer room was moved downstairs to a larger area currently undergoing its own expansion. Still, people pack the space when gathering for prayer.

Now another goal has been set — to purchase the other two-thirds, or about 10,000 square feet, of its 182 Hegemen Drive, Colchester, base. In order to buy the rest of the building, the society needs to raise \$750,000 by Sept. 1, when the current tenant is moving out.

Mostafa Elkasaby of Essex Junction explained the Islamic Society has been looking into expansion opportunities for a few years, watching the growth of the state's Muslim population and realizing as it continues not everyone would fit into the existing space.

When the opportunity to purchase the rest of the Hegeman Drive building, now inhabited by Earthlogic, Inc., RetroMotion Media and Egan Media Productions (the owner of the other two-thirds of the building) arose, it was time to make the move.

Despite being named the least religious state in a Gallup study, the Muslim population in Vermont continues to flourish. "We're actually the opposite case, we're gaining numbers," Hassan said.

Currently there are about 3,200 Muslims living in the state, Elkasaby said, many of them have been resettled in Vermont through refugee programs, coming from Bosnia, Iraq, Somalia and Syria.

The Colchester location was chosen initially as it was central for much of the Muslim population living mostly in Chittenden County. The Vermont center is the closest of its kind to Montreal. Visitors on their way to Canada often stop to visit and participate in Friday prayer, Elkasaby said.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, assistant professor in the University of Vermont's religion department, said the Islamic Society's need to expand is an example of a group serving its community well.

The Colchester center is unlike mosques in larger cities, Morgenstein Fuerst said, because it is more ethnically diverse.

She added the community served is large enough that it needs a bigger center but small enough to bring together different ethnic groups, mirroring Vermont's small-town lifestyle.

Elkasaby came to Vermont in 2008, when his two sons were young children. He felt strange at first, outside his comfort zone, the way someone from a traditionally Christian country might feel walking down the street on Christmas Eve with no one saying "Merry Christmas."

Comfort was provided by the Islamic Society, he said.

Having the chance to meet and converse with people who share views, traditions and language, he said, was “beautifully shocking.”

“You’re not coming to Vermont to be disconnected from your origins, there is something that will make you feel safe and connected,” Elkasaby said.

This is different than the role of mosques in Muslim countries, which Elkasaby said are typically used as a place of worship, with cultural events held elsewhere in the community. The Colchester center serves as both.

Community center

In addition to providing religious services to the Muslim community, the Islamic Society plans to continue growing as a community center, providing a social, cultural and educational hub, and overcoming obstacles presented due to the lack of space. This includes a recreation center for youth and expanded resources to help newcomers in Vermont ask for help and adjust to their new community.

Having a larger area will allow the center to perform its community role more effectively.

The Islamic Society’s message of community involvement spreads well beyond its home base. Members participate in Green Up Day events, help at the Burlington food shelf and at the KeyBank Vermont City Marathon.

“Our religion does not teach to be isolated from people and ‘me, myself and I,’ this kind of thing,” Hassan said; Islam teaches the best people are those who are most helpful.

Children in the community often start in education programs at age 3 or 4, Hassan explained.

“We’re trying to educate our children from the very beginning, to be good sons and daughters, good brothers and sisters, good friends,” Hassan said. Children are taught to put their egos aside, using “we” instead of “I,” to be good family members and eventually good community members.

He said instilling in children the idea of purity of the soul, society and community will eventually benefit the country as a whole by creating productive and innovative citizens.

“We don’t want our children to be kidnapped by any other radical thoughts or people who actually take things out of context and put in action,” Hassan said; it is important to raise children the proper way.

Elkasaby also hopes having a larger center could help better project the society’s image locally.

The society welcomes non-Muslims to visit, ask questions and learn. Local colleges utilize the center for research and Elkasaby said the building serves as an information center about Islam.

“We are your neighbors, if you have any questions, concerns, need help with anything, come to us, talk to us, the doors are always open,” he said.

Expanding the center is an investment in the image of Islam in the country, Hassan added.

Funding

Fundraising for the expansion has started; society members have been asked to invest in the center’s future.

Hassan explained if each family paid for one square meter of space, their portion to contribute would total about \$1,000. The expanded building is just part of the vision, Elkasaby said, the real contribution comes in the commitment to the center, participating in future programs and forming a lasting connection. In another 15 years, Hassan said the Islamic Society will likely run into the same problem again, as the population is constantly growing. This, he said, is evidence of success.

If the proper space is obtained, visitors will better be able to learn about the religion and members of the society will be able to better help them understand the faith.

More information

To learn more about the Islamic Society of Vermont and its expansion effort, visit www.isvt.org.