

MUSLIM GROUP LONGS FOR MOSQUE OF ITS OWN

ASSOCIATION FACES CHALLENGES IN ESTABLISHING PERMANENT PLACE OF PRAYER

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A local Muslim group in Milton that has been on a quest to establish a place of prayer since 2004 is turning to council for help.

"We are perhaps the biggest religious group in Milton to rent out town facilities for our prayer needs across weeks, months and years," said Fahim Umaid, who represented Muslim Association of Milton, at a recent council meeting.

For its weekly Friday prayers, the group uses the gym area at Milton Sports Centre. This poses problems of its own, such as traffic congestion and parking issues, even with multiple back-to-back prayers scheduled to meet the occupancy limit.

"Our hearts long to get places of our own. I'm sure there might be other groups that are trying to achieve the same goals," he said.

Sharing some of their recent efforts, Umaid said that they have made leasing offers to more than 15 locations and purchase offers to more than six properties since 2016 — all to no avail.

Among the challenges they had in securing a deal include the lack of religious zoning and insufficient parking space. Condo corporations and plazas also typically don't want to lease out to religious groups, despite the group getting occupancy permits from the town, he said.

"There are (by)laws in effect to allow land for parks, schools and other community services in ev-



Bambang Sadewo/Torstar
Fahim Umaid, who represented Muslim Association of Milton at a recent council meeting, said that mosques are central in a Muslim's life.

"Our hearts long to get places of our own."

-Fahim Umaid

ery neighbourhood. But there is no bylaw allocating religious zone places in every subdivision, especially for a community like ours," he said, adding that as a registered charity organization they have contributed tremendously to make Milton what it is today.

"We need spaces to get this going. And we desperately need it now," he said.

As the town is in the process of reviewing and updating its official plan, Coun. Sameera Ali hopes that staff will consult with all religious groups in Milton that are facing similar problems, including the Filipino Christian community and the Hindu community, the latter she noted has to travel to Oakville.

She added that many religious groups can't compete with the market when it comes to bidding on pieces and parcels of land.

Going forward, she be-

THE ISSUE:

LACK OF A MOSQUE IN TOWN

LOCAL IMPACT: HAVING A PERMANENT MOSQUE ALLOWS LOCAL MUSLIM ASSOCIATION TO PROVIDE MORE SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY

lieves that the community should have designated spots that are zoned in a way that they can be converted to religious places of worship — as well as youth and seniors hangout spaces and more.

Given the complexities of the many bylaws, rules and regulations and provincial standards that the current official plan is bound to, Ali said the reviewing process "is the time for us to add stipulations to make it easy for us to have a very well-connected community in the future that provides for all the needs of community."

For the Muslim Association of Milton, having a permanent mosque will also allow them to serve the community in other ways, including providing counselling service, funeral service, daycare, youth programs and activities and more.

"We're not outsiders asking for unrealistic favours. We are Miltonians," Umaid said.

"We have the same shared objectives to be good citizens to keep our youth focused on good morals and behaviours by offering programs and activities for their overall development."

STORY BEHIND THE STORY

We attended a recent council meeting, where the group chronicled their efforts to establish a place of prayer to no success since 2004.

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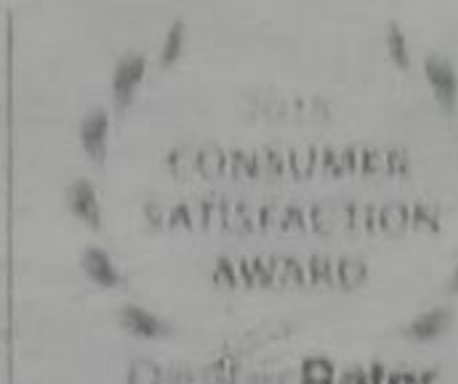
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