

Justice Dept. settles in mosque construction dispute

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The U.S. Justice Department on Tuesday (Sept. 6) announced a settlement with Henrico County, Va., over the county's alleged violation of a federal anti-discrimination law when it refused to rezone property for a group of Muslims who wanted to build a mosque. The Justice Department claimed the county's actions violated the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 (RLUIPA), which prohibits religious discrimination in land use and zoning decisions. The settlement requires the county to allow the mosque to be built without improper interference or delay.

"Religious freedom is one of our most cherished rights, and that right includes the ability to assemble and build places of worship without facing discrimination," said Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Thomas Perez.

The case arose in late 2008 when local Muslims were denied the ability to build the first mosque in the county, just north of Richmond. The Muslims filed suit, charging that the denial of the request was "arbitrary, capricious, and unreasonable."

The Justice Department joined the case in March 2010 and found evidence that the request to build had been denied on the basis of hostility toward Muslims. The county had never turned down a rezoning application submitted by one of its 209 Christian churches, government attorneys said.

The settlement requires Henrico County to publicize its nondiscrimination policies and to provide training on RLUIPA to all county officials involved in land use matters.

"This agreement will ensure that religious freedom is upheld in Henrico County," said Neil H. MacBride, the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia.