

Muslim-majority council may be first in U.S.

by [Niraj Warikoo](#) in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue

Residents of Hamtramck, Michigan, have elected a Muslim majority to their city council, symbolizing the demographic changes that have transformed the city once known for being a Polish-Catholic enclave.

Six candidates ran for three seats in the November election, and the top three vote-getters were Muslim, while the bottom three were non-Muslim. Two of the Muslim candidates, Anam Miah and Abu Musa, are incumbent city councilmen, while newcomer Saad Almasmari, the top vote-getter, was also elected. Incumbent city councilman Robert Zwolak came in fifth.

Some believe the city is the first in the United States with a Muslim majority on its city council.

“Hamtramck has made history,” said Hamtramck community leader Bill Meyer. “The election was far from close, with the three Muslim winners each gaining over 1,000 votes, while the other three candidates garnered less than 700 votes each.”

Formerly known for its Polish population, Hamtramck is now about 24 percent Arab (mostly Yemeni); 19 percent African-American; 15 percent Bangladeshi; 12 percent Polish; and 6 percent Yugoslavian (many Bosnian), according to U.S. Census figures.

The percentage of residents who are Muslim is unclear because the U.S. Census does not ask about religion. Estimates of the Muslim population range from one-third to more than one-half of city residents.

A few days after the election, Gov. Rick Snyder attended the opening of Bangla Town, an area that celebrates Bangladeshi-American culture in Hamtramck and nearby neighborhoods. About 41 percent of the city’s population are immigrants, the highest percentage among cities in the metro Detroit area. Pope John Paul II, who was Polish, visited Hamtramck in 1987; a statue commemorating his visit sits in a city park.

Three of the Muslims on Hamtramck's city council are of Bangladeshi descent, while Alasmari is of Yemeni descent. The only other Arab-American Muslim in the council's history was Abdul Algazali, who died in February.

After contentious debate, the city in 2004 allowed the Muslim call to prayer to be broadcast publicly five times a day from mosques through loudspeakers. The call to prayer has drawn complaints from residents who say it's loud and intrusive, waking them up early and bothering them. City council candidate Susan Dunn, who placed fourth, raised the issue during the campaign, prompting a response from Alasmari during a city council meeting last month.

"We all want to live peacefully and respectfully," he said to the council during the October meeting, according to a video he posted on his Facebook page. "Our special thing is . . . the diversity in this town."

Alasmari said the call to prayer "is not as loud" as Dunn thinks it is. "We as Muslims respect our neighbors, and we don't like to bother anybody," he said. "As the Prophet Mohammad said: he who believes in Allah and the last day, let him not harm his neighbors."

Meyer, who is not Muslim, said that Muslims in Hamtramck "have helped bring stability, security, and sobriety while lessening the amount of drugs and crime in the city." —*Detroit Free Press*

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