

Department of Justice to investigate denial of New Jersey mosque

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NEWARK, New Jersey — The U.S. Department of Justice has opened a civil rights investigation into the decision by Bernards Township authorities to deny a Muslim community's application to build a mosque in the township, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Newark has confirmed.

The investigation will look into whether the township violated the rights of members of the Islamic Society of Basking Ridge over its prolonged, and ultimately failed, application to build a mosque on Church Street, according to the U.S. attorney's office.

The department's Civil Rights Division is tasked with enforcing federal statutes prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, disability, religion, familial status, and national origin.

The Islamic society and its president, Mohammad Ali Chaudry, last week filed a federal lawsuit against the township and 15 members of the Township Committee and the Planning Board, charging that they manufactured reasons to deny the application—even changing the zoning ordinance to make building new houses of worship difficult, if not impossible.

Among other things, the lawsuit called for appointment of a monitor to oversee compliance with all federal laws in all committee and planning board decisions for five years.

A lawyer for the society, Adeel A. Mangi, said he would not comment on the investigation.

Mayor Carol Bianchi issued a statement saying that the township will cooperate with investigators from the justice department and the U.S. attorney's office.

“I know our Planning Board members and they are honest and ethical,” she said. “I trust they made their decisions based solely on land use considerations.”

The suit was filed about three months after township planners unanimously rejected the proposal to build the mosque, which was the subject of 39 public hearings over a four-year period.

The lawsuit says the society spent more than \$450,000 on the proposal.

Planners cited a lack of details regarding parking, traffic safety and buffer zones bordering the site’s residential neighbors.

The society sought to build the mosque on a 4.3-acre tract in an area where houses of worship are permitted uses, its suit says. It was proposed to be 4,252 square feet, or the size of a large house, according to the lawsuit.

However, the proposal encountered strong opposition in the township, with some residents saying the mosque could be a haven for terrorists, the lawsuit says. A citizens group, Bernards Township Citizens for Responsible Development, opposed the proposed mosque on public safety and land use concerns.

Planners frequently agreed with “one unreasonable and picayune land use objection after another” raised by opponents, creating a “Kafkaesque” scenario for what should have been a routine approval, the lawsuit states.

Along with a federal monitor, the society said in the lawsuit that it is seeking judicial orders to overturn the denial of its application, invalidation of restrictive sections of the zoning ordinance and compensatory damages.