

Mosque construction continues to attract opposition across U.S.

by [Judy Keen](#)

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c. 2012 USA Today CHICAGO (RNS) Mohammed Labadi had a lot at stake when the DeKalb City Council voted Tuesday (May 29) on a request from the Islamic Society of Northern Illinois University to build a two-story mosque.

Labadi, a businessman and Islamic Society board member, said a bigger mosque is needed to replace the small house where local Muslims now worship. He also was hoping for affirmation that his neighbors and city officials have no fear of the Muslim community.

"Don't look at me just as a Muslim, look at me as an American," Labadi said. It's time, he says, "to take the unfortunate stereotypes about Muslims out of the picture." The City Council unanimously approved the plan.

In the decade since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, animosity toward Muslims sometimes has taken the form of opposition to construction of mosques and other Islamic facilities. National debate erupted over plans for an Islamic community center that became known as the "Ground Zero mosque" in Lower Manhattan.

In the last five years, there has been "anti-mosque activity" in more than half of U.S. states, according to the ACLU. Some mosques were vandalized -- a \$5,000 reward is being offered in a 2011 Wichita mosque arson case -- and others were targets of efforts to deny zoning permits.

Mosque opponents often raise concerns about traffic and parking, but Daniel Mach, director of the ACLU's freedom of religion program, says they can be "sham arguments" that mask anti-Muslim sentiment.

"I hope that eventually there will be greater acceptance for all faiths, including Islam," Mach said.

One thing is clear: The number of mosques is on the rise. In 2010, there were 2,106 mosques in the U.S., up from 1,209 in 2000, according to a study by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and other groups. A 2011 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life estimated there are 2.75 million Muslims in the U.S.

Kevin Vodak, litigation director of the Chicago chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, said a 2000 federal law meant to prevent zoning laws from discriminating against religious institutions is a potent tool. He cited the law -- the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act -- in a pending federal lawsuit against DuPage County, Ill., for "unlawful conduct and discriminatory practices" when it denied a permit for the Irshad Learning Center in 2010.

A pending complaint against the city of Lomita, Calif., for denying an application from the Islamic Center of South Bay to rebuild its mosque, also cites the RLUIPA law.

Some DuPage County residents who objected to the permit "raised allegations of terrorism," Vodak said. "The post-9/11 atmosphere has created a lot of fear and hysteria about Muslim institutions."

Some people who object to mosque projects say religion is not a factor.

The DuPage County home where Jacqueline Sitkiewicz has lived since 1978 is adjacent to a house the Islamic Center of Western Suburbs (ICWS) hoped to use as a mosque. The county board voted against the plan this month.

Sitkiewicz says her concerns were traffic, drainage and the effect on property values. "I don't care what their religion is," she said. "This is a residential area, that's all of it."

ICWS lawyer Mark Daniel says the group is considering legal action. "There was no valid reason for denial," he said.

Attorney Marc Grenier represents condo associations that object to plans for a mosque in Norwalk, Conn. The size of the project, parking and the impact on neighboring properties are their chief concerns, he said. "Our opposition ... has nothing to do with anyone's right to worship."

A zoning committee voted last week to recommend that the full zoning commission deny the Norwalk mosque proposal; that vote is set for June 6.

The Brookfield (Wis.) Common Council this month approved the Islamic Society of Milwaukee's plans for a mosque. During an earlier Plan Commission meeting, Mayor Steve Ponto told the crowd that comments on religion would not be considered.

Still, said Othman Atta, the Islamic Society's executive director, some opponents said the mosque would teach violence and impose Islamic law. "The level of knowledge about Muslims is pretty abysmal," he said. "People, if they don't understand something, they tend to fear it."

Ebrahim Moosa, a Duke University professor of religion and Islamic studies, worries that discrimination against Muslims is growing.

"Opposition to mosques," he said, "is not a misunderstanding, because reasonable people can talk and mutually educate."