

AMHERST BULLETIN

Mosque plan inches forward

By [Scott Merzbach \(mailto:smerzbach@gazettenet.com\)](mailto:smerzbach@gazettenet.com)
Staff Writer

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A smaller parking lot and stricter limits on the number of people allowed in the building at one time appear to be making neighbors in Amherst and Pelham more comfortable with the conversion of a former school on Harkness Road into the Hampshire Mosque.

Planning Board members asked mosque officials to provide a better management plan for parking, ensure cars won't need to park on the street, and improve the landscaping on the property in a hearing this month that was continued to June 2. Most of the parking and landscaping issues have been resolved, and board members suggested they will not need the mosque to hire engineers to complete a traffic impact study.

Warren Hall, chairman of Pelham's Planning Board, who lives at 60 Harkness Road, said three-quarters of the people affected by the mosque live in Pelham. He began the three-hour session by asking the board to do what it could to minimize the impact from the mosque.

"If the applicant considers due diligence a hostile act, then I would respectfully submit that he doesn't understand the process." Hall said.

Hall had initially asked that the mosque be required to complete a traffic study, a request supported in a letter from Pelham Administrative Assistant David Dann. But Hall said the study seems unnecessary if parking was sufficiently reduced.

Hall said Pelham officials could live with a modification to the mosque's parking plan to allow only 18 to 20 cars and restrictions on parking on the street, as well as capping the building capacity at 62 people.

But Jeff Kris, of 202 Harkness Road, Amherst, said he would still like to see a traffic impact study as he is concerned about safety from adding more traffic. "I feel like there is a business moving into my neighborhood," Kris said.

Amherst attorney Alan Seewald, representing abutters Steve and Linda Prothers, of 256 Harkness Road, told the board three major issues need to be addressed.

First, the Protherses live just 15 feet away from the proposed mosque and should be better screened from the mosque. Second, much of the use on the property, including parking, should be moved to the northern portion of the parcel. Third, various impact studies, including for traffic and the drinking water supply, should be done.

Linda Prothers told the board that residents were taken aback at the previous meeting when Mohammed Ali Hazratji, president of the Hampshire Mosque, began his comments by stating that anyone expressing concerns about the mosque might be racist.

"This is not about who uses the land, but how the land is used," Prothers said. She said she and other residents are accustomed to a quiet neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Hazratji said the mosque shouldn't be accountable for safety concerns, such as speeding and erratic vehicles that have previously struck and killed pets.

"We are not really responsible for the pre-existing problems that were brought up with great promotion last week," Hazratji said.

The busiest time at the mosque would be Friday afternoons, when up to 20 cars might arrive for prayer, he said. Most other times, only four or five vehicles would come to the mosque.

"I don't believe the volume from our cars will be a hazard to anyone," Hazratji said.

Board member Denise Barberet said her concern about asking for a traffic study is that it will be an extra cost for the mosque, even though she is not sure it will lead to better road conditions for residents.

Fellow board member Steve Schreiber agreed, saying he doesn't need engineers to tell him that sidewalks are missing from Harkness Road or that intersections won't be degraded with the additional traffic.

"I just can't see how a congregation of 62 occupants will have a significant impact on the intersections," Schreiber said,

Hazratji said 264 Harkness Road, which in the 1990s was used as the Harkness Road High School campus, was identified as the ideal site to expand from its current location at the Carriage Shops. Local Muslims are only looking for a place of worship, peace and tranquility, and were not expecting to encounter opposition to their plans, he said.

"My goal was to show people that our coming there would be good for them, and we'd be good neighbors," Hazratji said.

<h4>Police: Not a problem</h4>

Amherst Police Chief Scott Livingstone said his department has rarely had to address traffic issues on Harkness Road.

"It's not one of our streets that ever comes to mind for problems or requests for radar enforcement," Livingstone said.

Joan Lindeman, coordinator of the Interfaith Opportunities Council, said her organization strongly supports the move and also wants to help residents with the traffic situation they may be confronting.

The Rev. Vicki Kemper, pastor of First Congregational Church in Amherst, also offered support for both the mosque and the neighbors. Kemper said it is important to separate valid concerns from irrational fears, noting that change of any kind can be scary and threatening.

Many of the other issues raised by residents and town officials have been resolved by Ford-Gillen Architects, which the mosque hired to complete the development plans. These include modifying the lights in the parking areas to ensure neighboring properties aren't affected by light spilling from the property, and installing a second handicapped ramp at the rear of the building to meet building code.