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## Islamic cemetery proposed: Belchertown site would be first in western Mass

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BELCHERTOWN - The Islamic Society of Western Massachusetts is looking to buy a Washington Road property with the hope of establishing an Muslim cemetery there, the first of its kind in this part of the state.

Ali Awkal, a real estate agent and a member of the West Springfield-based organization, said the society has been actively looking for a property that could be developed as a burial ground for the last year. The Belchertown parcel is appealing because it is flat and not located on a wetland, Awkal said.

"We have a mosque in Worcester and a mosque in West Springfield, and we want something in between because both sites could use this cemetery," Awkal said. The Hampshire County Mosque in Amherst is also associated with the society.

The property in question is a 10-acre parcel located at 138 Washington St., Awkal said. The society is awaiting approval from the Department of Environmental Protection, which must decide if the proposed site is suitable for a cemetery, before purchasing the property, Awkal said. The society is negotiating a price for the property with real estate agent Kenneth Lieberman, he said.

The parcel is valued at about \$225,000, Awkal said. The cemetery, if built, would be maintained by the society, he said.

Judy Metcalf, director of the Quabbin Health District, which oversees public health issues in Belchertown, said she has received an inquiry from the society regarding the procedure that must be followed to establish a cemetery.

The society will first have to receive approval from DEP, which will examine whether the proposed burial site would threaten drinking water, Metcalf said. If the department signs off on the plan, the Belchertown Board of Health will then examine it, she said.

"The Board of Health looks at the public health and environmental implications of using that land for a burial ground," Metcalf said.

Ultimate approval must be granted by Town Meeting, Metcalf said, noting that the procedure must be followed for the establishment of all private and public cemeteries in

Belchertown.

### **A burgeoning need**

There is an increasing need for a local Islamic cemetery, as the area's Muslim population has grown in recent years, Awkal said, noting that the closest current cemetery is in Enfield, Conn.

"There has been a Muslim society in the United States for the past 200 years, but now there is a large influx of people from India, Pakistan and the Middle Eastern area, and the community is getting big in number. That is why we need a cemetery," he said.

Unlike many Christian burials, Muslims do not embalm their dead, Awkal said, noting that Jews adhere to a similar practice. Muslims are often buried with no more than a shroud, rather than a coffin, he said.

Ultimately, though, there is little difference between an Islamic cemetery and a Christian one, Awkal said.

"The only difference is that we really don't make mausoleums or large tombstones," Awkal said. "We just put a little piece of marble, write 'In the name of God the merciful and compassionate,' and the date of birth, death and the person's name."

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