

Opinion



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The 'M-word'
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Seven days of emotional, butt-numbing hearings in Walkersville, and in the end it comes down to a handful of guys on the appeals board. Doesn't seem fair that these unpaid, unelected volunteers have to shoulder the decision that could either land them in court or make them pariahs in their own town.

They're essentially damned if they approve a special exception to allow the Ahmadiyyas to build a place of worship on David Moxley's farm, and damned if they don't.

In the end, no matter how scrupulously opponents avoided the "M" word during the hearings, if the exception is denied, Walkersville is looking at a costly legal process that it will probably lose on the basis of religious freedom.

The town would be better off using those millions to buy Moxley's farm.

Of course, the town commissioners must have an inkling they'd wind up in court. They keep postponing a vote on Commissioner Chad Weddle's suggested zoning change that would not only make the board's decision a heckuva lot easier, but would send the Ahmadiyyas packing. It would also put them firmly afoul of the Constitution.

The valiant efforts of those who want to keep the Muslims out may not count for much in the end. Moxley attorney Roman Storzler cited case after case to support his arguments, including *Marks v City of Chesapeake*, where a court held that a local government "may not adopt the discriminatory biases of their residential population."

Which is, in part, why residents carefully sidestepped the talk of Muslims, talk that figured prominently in earlier discussions.

Since opponents organized into the for-profit Citizens of Walkersville and procured the talents of a local disability rights lawyer, they've toned down the rhetoric, but too little too late. Their choice of spokesperson doesn't bode well for their image, either. Spotlight-loving Steve Berryman, a Dearbought resident with children in Walkersville schools, is not shy about taking credit for the bloviated anti-Muslim creeds, and photos of his home-security gun collection that he publishes on the web.

Ed Marino, another of CoW's founding members, said the Ahmadiyyas would make Walkersville the "Mecca of America."

That fear-mongering talk is verboten now. Today it's traffic, water, sewer, dust, noise, cooking smells, you name it. Some folks are convinced that traffic is the main objection, others have convinced themselves it is.

Though Burgess Ralph Whitmore's words may come back to haunt him, he probably made the most honest appraisal of the town's mood when he said that the Muslims were "a culture we're not used to."

"There are people who are concerned because of who they are. There's no two ways about it," he said.

On a recent visit to Walkersville, I talked to a few folks who worried that their town could be the target of a terrorist threat if the Ahmads move in. I wanted to remind them that brewing a few short miles down the road is a real threat to the public health and safety, the expansion of biolabs at Fort Detrick.

But, apparently genetically engineering virulent viruses in the midst of a densely populated city isn't as threatening as a peace-loving sect of Muslims.

Whipping up a healthy froth of fear is a popular pastime usually reserved for our post-9/11 federal government, complete with laughably ineffective color coding. But unlike Reagonomics, this really does trickle down to the local level.

Walkersville's not so different from other small towns feeling invaded by immigrants and overdevelopment. When fear of the unknown is added to the mix, especially one that walks and talks like our country's sworn enemy, some opposition is inevitable.

But that doesn't make it right.