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Executive session expected on center

by Jeremy Hauck | Staff Writer

Walkersville's Zoning Board of Appeals is scheduled to return Tuesday to town hall to begin hammering out a decision on a proposed Muslim retreat center.

The Silver Spring-based Ahmadiyya Muslim Community has asked the board for a special exception to use the 224-acre Nicodemus Farm in Walkersville for a place of worship. The three volunteer members of the board will sift through a long trail of paper evidence and public testimony from earlier this month before making a decision.

The Muslim group wants to build a 42,000 square-foot building, including two gymnasiums, and hold annual three-day summer religious retreats for between 5,000 and 10,000 of its American members on the farm. The appeals board has to judge the proposal's impact against a list of 14 factors.

Dozens of residents testified against the proposed retreat center during hearings that lasted from Jan. 8 to Jan. 16.

Board members Harold Roderuck, Vaughn Zimmerman and Dan Thomas are expected kick off deliberations with a lesson from Danny O'Connor, Walkersville's town attorney, on how the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 applies to the pending decision.

The federal statute seeks to protect religious groups from being unfairly zoned against.

David W. Moxley, owner of the Nicodemus Farm, has retained the services of Storzer and Greene, a New York and Washington, D.C. firm that specializes in the statute, known as RLUIPA.

Storzer outlined the statute for the board on Jan. 15, and the appeals board on Jan. 16 asked for an in-depth workshop from O'Connor.

One aspect of the statute that Storzer spelled out, called the "equal terms" provision, states that governments cannot treat non-religious gatherings more favorably than religious gatherings.

"The entire focus of this hearing has been on the one weekend a year event," Storzer said. "And we all know the town has other large events that are hosted here annually."

The reference to the annual summer fire carnival, a weeklong fundraiser for the Walkersville Volunteer Fire Company and the Walkersville Volunteer Rescue Company, was not the first, or the last, of the hearings.

William "Topper" Cramer, chief of the rescue company, on Jan. 9 urged the board to deny the Ahmadi's request, saying that the annual retreat, called "Jalsa Salana," would overwhelm his department.

"This carnival is not the magnitude that a three-day conference with 10,000 people in attendance could bring to the area," Cramer said during his statement.

Cramer's counterpart in the fire company told the board on Jan. 10 that up to 4,000 people attend the carnival's two fireworks nights. The most recent Jalsa Salana, held at the Dulles Expo Center in Chantilly, Va. attracted about 4,500 people. Ahsan Zafar, president of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA, told the board on Jan. 8 that the community does not anticipate 10,000 attendees at the event for some time.

Other Walkersville residents deplored any comparisons between the Jalsa Salana and the carnival.