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Hindu temple expansion in Bridgewater may be allowed

by Ralph R. Ortega/The Star-Ledger Wednesday March 26, 2008, 7:29 PM

Compromises should win zoning board approval for a proposed Hindu temple expansion in Bridgewater, and the dismissal of a federal lawsuit against the township, a lawyer for the temple said today.

Details of the compromises emerged after the township zoning board approved a memorandum of understanding with the Sri Venkateswara Hindu Temple on Tuesday.

Board attorney Lawrence Vastola said he was not authorized to speak, and did not discuss the memorandum. Township officials also declined to discuss the memorandum because of pending litigation against the board, including a federal lawsuit filed by the temple.

A lawyer representing the temple, however, confirmed the memorandum was approved.

Attorney Roman P. Storz said the compromises in the memorandum should help win board approval for a 20,500-square-foot cultural center at the temple and additional priest housing. He also said such an approval would likely lead to dismissal of a federal lawsuit filed by the temple against the township.

"That would be the end of the dispute," he said.

The compromises agreed to by the temple, Storz said, include restrictions to traffic flow and the way vehicles enter and leave the property, development of buffers around the property, securing state environmental approvals, and addressing minor issues.

Storz said the board must now follow up with a public hearing to consider variances sought in the temple's application, site plan applications and various modifications.

The temple off Route 206 at Old Farm Road has had its application to build the cultural center and additional priest housing repeatedly rejected by the zoning board since the expansion plan was first requested in 2004.

The resistance triggered a federal lawsuit that accused the board of violating the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. The law, passed by Congress five years ago, protects religious institutions from discrimination in land use applications and forbids government action that could burden religious assembly.

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Posted by Montclair52 on 03/26/08 at 9:36PM

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