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Controversial Sufism Reoriented Sanctuary on Track for Spring 2016 Completion

By Adam Blake



Sufism Reoriented Sanctuary construction site Photo Adam Blake

training we do involves group activity, involves people working together in harmony, and if they're all separated in little spaces apart, that can't happen. So this will enable us to move forward with our basic life pattern."

Construction began in May 2012 and is set to open mid-2016. Community members clashed with the organization for four years during the approval process.

"There were many public hearings, and a lot of the public records certainly reflected very boisterous discussion on both sides," District 2 Supervisor Candace Andersen said. "I think the majority of people recognize the right of a religion to be there and a sanctuary to be built, but it was just ensuring that visually and, more importantly, traffic and parking wasn't going to impact their neighborhood."

Since the area is technically in unincorporated Walnut Creek, the county was in charge of approving the project. On Feb. 29, 2012 the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to approve the project.

Reflecting on the process, project director for the new Sufism Reoriented Sanctuary, Robert Carpenter, saw the positive outcomes of the situation.

"On the one hand I was surprised at the volatility of the negativity and how it was focused," Carpenter said. "On the other hand, often times really important projects in the world require a certain amount of opposition because it creates a kind of pool of energy that we were therefore able to rise to."

Carpenter described how the project approval process served as a catalyst for the previously private group to get more involved in the community. Sufism Reoriented created a newsletter, met with non-Sufi neighbors and launched several social service programs including the White Pony Express, which donates unused food from restaurants, and the General Store, which gives clothing and supplies to those in need.

Saranap community members had specific concerns regarding the size and architecture of the proposed building, claiming it would be inconsistent with and uncharacteristic for the neighborhood. Other concerns included tree removal, increased traffic and parking. The temple will have 74 on-site

Anyone driving in the Saranap neighborhood located on the Lafayette border has undoubtedly noticed the large trucks and tall fencing at the construction site on Boulevard Way. The new Sufism Reoriented project was approved in April 2012 and is set to open spring of next year.

Sufism Reoriented is an Americanized spiritual movement that has been centered in Saranap for 35 years. The group has about 350 members, most of whom live within a mile of the new sanctuary. Indian spiritual leader Meher Baba founded the group in 1952.

According to Sufism Reoriented president Ira Deitrick, the group has lacked space for its congregation since the beginning.

"One of the wonderful parts of it for us is to finally put all of the activities together in one place and share the space," Deitrick said. "That's very important for us because the kind of spiritually

spaces as opposed to the 125 that would have been required pursuant to the Off-Street Parking Ordinance because many members pledged to walk and others pledged to form carpools. The county will monitor this conditional approval for several years after the new sanctuary opens.

The new sanctuary will be 66,000 square feet, two-thirds of which will be underground. The design was envisioned by its spiritual director or "Murshida," Carol Weyland Conner, and designed by the Philip Johnson/Alan Ritchie architectural firm. The building consists of one large dome in the middle with smaller ones surrounding it.

According to Carpenter, the circles are symbolic for some of the group's guiding beliefs.

"The idea is that essentially everyone is equidistant from God. So consequently the circle represents that basic notion. There are no corners, there are no edges, there's nobody out on the edge," Carpenter said.

Many community members are still unhappy with this new addition to the neighborhood, though resistance to a proposed "Saranap Village" by the Hall Equities Group has taken the spotlight (see related story on page A3). Overall, things seemed to have smoothed out since construction on the project began.

"Since we worked out the initial details, I've found the neighborhood has been very amicable, supportive of the process moving forward," Andersen said.

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[back](#)

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