

NYC panel clears way for mosque near Ground Zero

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NEW YORK — Applause mixed with cries of "Shame!" Tuesday as a New York City panel cleared the way for the construction of an Islamic cultural center and mosque on a street two blocks from the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The city Landmarks Preservation Commission voted unanimously to deny protected historic status to a building that would be torn down to build the center. The 1858 commercial structure did not have enough historic or architectural significance to merit such a designation, the commission said. The ruling was a last hurdle for the cultural center plan, which organizers say will include a gym, cultural and educational activity space, a mosque and a memorial to those who died in the terrorist attacks.

The proposed center has stirred furious debate over the appropriateness of building an Islamic center near the site of attacks by Muslim extremists.

City officials support the center in the name of religious freedom and private property rights. The Cordoba Initiative, the group proposing the center, says it will be a space for moderate Muslim voices. But some 9/11 family members and politicians, including Sarah Palin, the Republican former governor of Alaska, say building a mosque near the World Trade Center site insults the memory of those who died at the hands of Muslim extremists on 9/11.

Palin, via Twitter, has called the proposed mosque an "unnecessary provocation; it stabs hearts." Debra Burlingame, whose brother Charles was the pilot of the jet that was crashed into the Pentagon, objected Tuesday to "the pain that this will cause."

"Our enemies will view this as a symbolic victory," she said.

After the vote, Mayor Michael Bloomberg traveled to an island off Lower Manhattan to praise the decision with the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop.

"We would betray our values — and play into our enemies' hands — if we were to treat Muslims differently than anyone else," he said, appearing with a group of religious leaders. "To cave to popular sentiment would be to hand a victory to the terrorists."

Brian Jordan, a Franciscan friar who served as a chaplain to workers digging through the wreckage at the World Trade Center site, said, "Do not blame Islam, brothers and sisters. Blame fanaticism."

The controversy continues years of dispute about construction at and near the Trade Center site, where a memorial and office buildings are being built. It also has raised questions about how close is too close in a dense and diverse city.

"Part of being a New Yorker is living with your neighbors in mutual respect and tolerance," Bloomberg, an independent, said Tuesday.

The Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish group that fights bigotry, also has opposed the center, though other Jewish groups have supported it as an example of protecting the rights of a minority religious group.

"This is not a question of rights, but a question of what is right," the Anti-Defamation League said in a statement last week. "Building an Islamic Center in the shadow of the World Trade Center will cause some victims more pain — unnecessarily — and that is not right."

The building already is being used for prayer services, Bloomberg said.

The center, to be called Park51 after the street address of the site at 45-51 Park Place, is to be built by a non-profit organization being formed by a real estate developer and the leader of a Manhattan mosque, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who has said the center will be for "the vast majority of moderate Muslims. ... We condemn terrorism, we recognize it exists within our faith community, but we're committed to eradicate it."

The building, whose architect is unknown and which once housed a Burlington Coat Factory store, "does not rise to the level of an individual landmark," landmarks commission Chairman Robert Tierney said Tuesday.

Parts of one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center landed on the building's roof on 9/11. But debris from the collapse of the two towers was so widespread, said commission member Christopher Moore, "one cannot designate hundreds of buildings on that (basis) alone."

As the physical scars of the attacks disappear beneath new buildings in Manhattan, "Where do you draw the line?" Ralph Seliger, a blogger on Middle East issues, asked before the commission vote. "In no way is this intended to desecrate the memory of those who died there."