

## Residents of Oakland peacefully coexist with mosque



By [Nafari Vanaski](#)  
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Schenley Farms, a historically designated area tucked away in Oakland, is zoned for single-family residences and, judging from the huge houses and well-kept lawns, those families are doing pretty well. Walk up and down Bigelow Boulevard and Tennyson Avenue, and there appears to be a theme.

Not surprisingly, people living there have almost as many opinions about a proposed mosque and Islamic center in lower Manhattan as there are houses on the block.

In Christina Schmidlapp's house on Bigelow Boulevard, there are at least two opinions: Neither she nor her husband thinks the center is a good idea, because of its proximity to ground zero.

"I would never tell them they don't have the right to build it," she said. "But I don't agree with the wisdom of building it there."

Her daughter, on the other hand, backs the project.

If Schmidlapp cranes her neck over her porch, she can see the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh down the street from her house. She's never been inside, but she finds it, as she says, cool.

"We're happy and proud to have them here," she said.

Yet at one time, there was a period of great tension between residents and the mosque -- and it revolved around, of all things, a playground.

It started in 2008 when the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh announced its intention to build a playground there. The mosque has been there since 1992, which is well after Schenley Farms was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. But the building was designated for worship in the early 1960s, when it was a gathering place for Jehovah's Witnesses.

"At first there was the wrong perception" about residents' objections, said Norman Cleary, a member of the Schenley Farms Civic Association. He lives directly across the street from the mosque. The objections weren't traced to the religion practiced in the mosque, as some thought, but to concerns about increased activity and about noise coming from the playground at all hours. When the issue went before the zoning hearing board, tensions rose.

Then something truly bizarre happened. The residents and the board of directors at the mosque ... sat down and talked. That resulted in plans for a play space that would fit the overall look of the neighborhood, and a promise that the playground would close by 9 p.m.

And now• "We have a very cooperative relationship," Cleary says. AbduSemih A. Tadese, the imam at the mosque agrees: "Many of our neighbors understand we are exercising our right."

The playground at Schenley Farms and the proposed Islamic center in lower Manhattan are different situations. To start, the proximity to ground zero makes some uncomfortable. And there's the fact that the reason ground zero exists can be traced to Muslim extremists.

As Tadese points out, every group has bad seeds. He wonders why, though, when dealing with Muslims, people target the religion as a whole and not individuals.

It's Ramadan, a holy month of fasting on the Islamic calendar, and a recent evening at Schenley Farms was a picture of harmonious coexistence: Muslims walked toward their mosque while neighbors sat on their porches, walked dogs, or continued with yard work.

It makes you wonder if the planned community center in New York could enjoy this sort of peace.