

Religiously diverse groups say mosque should get OK

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Baptists, Sikhs and Hare Krishnas told a federal court they think a proposal to erect a New Jersey mosque should be approved.

A planning board denied the application of the Islamic Society of Basking Ridge in December.

The board held 39 public hearings as the society sought approval for four years, said the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which filed a legal brief May 11. The society designed the proposed mosque to look like a house—with minarets that resemble chimneys—so it would blend into the neighborhood.

“A Muslim mosque cannot be subjected to a different land-use approval process than a Christian church simply because local protesters oppose the mosque,” reads the brief from almost 20 religious and civil rights groups. The groups added that “such unequal treatment of the mosque in this case represents a potential threat” to their free exercise rights.

Groups joining the brief include the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and the SBC International Mission Board.

Others include the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Sikh Coalition, the American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, and the National Association of Evangelicals.

“This mosque is part of my American dream,” said Mohammad Ali Chaudry,

president of the Islamic society. “We are overwhelmed by this extraordinary support from so many diverse groups all supporting our position and affirming that Muslims, too, have the right to worship in Bernards Township.”

The society sued the board in March, saying it violated the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act and used excuses to deny the application.

The society’s allegations “do not represent our community,” Bernards Township Mayor Carol Bianchi said. “It is not unusual for an applicant to appeal a denial, and it is their right.”

The U.S. Justice Department said in March it would investigate the denial of the mosque’s application.