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Parking Policy Provides a Pretext for Anti-Muslim Discrimination

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Issue

Building a mosque in the US gives rise to opposition. Sometimes, opponents overtly depict Muslims as foreigners threatening American values. In other cases, new mosques are stalled for years or stopped altogether because of concerns about parking: Local officials and residents demand that mosques build more spaces, conduct additional costly parking studies, or attend further public hearings about parking.

Mosques are far from the only type of proposed development to face parking-related opposition. Our study isolated the role of religious prejudice by analyzing the opposition faced by 107 newly constructed American mosques, comparing each one to a nearby church built around the same time. We also examined public records of city council hearings and invited representatives from a sample of the mosques to tell us about their experiences, whether or how parking came up, and the impacts of parking-related opposition.

Key Research Findings

Newly proposed mosques are 16-18% more likely to experience opposition than nearby newly proposed churches. While local residents often oppose new development of all types—housing, restaurants, and places of worship—they target mosques much more frequently than nearby churches, according to our analysis of local news. Moreover, while mosque opponents commonly raise issues over parking, parking did not surface as a concern with any of the churches in our sample (Figure 1).

Mosques and churches build more parking than zoning codes require. More than two-thirds of mosques and three-quarters of churches in our sample exceeded the parking requirement. The median number of spaces provided was 113% of the requirement for mosques and 107% for churches. Even when the mosques provided more parking than the city required, parking policy debates stalled or blocked these projects.

Cities impose ad hoc or arbitrary requirements on mosques that go above and beyond those specified in the zoning code and delay, increase costs, or derail construction. Some mosques were asked to prepare parking studies even when their proposed projects already met local parking requirements. Elected officials and community members disputed the methods to calculate the amount of parking required for mosques in ways that they did not for churches. For example, cities in California and New Jersey estimated the sizes of prayer rugs for their calculation. A city staff report in Hayward, California said: “Since the men tend to arrive alone ... more parking is needed for a mosque than for a typical church.”

Mosque opponents use coded language to mask religious prejudice. Public records show how community members complain that mosques would create a “change in the neighborhood.” Some said that mosques are a “threat” to home values, suggesting that Muslims make a neighborhood less desirable. Others singled out Muslims by expressing concern that “It would be upsetting to hear a daily call to prayer,” or that city police might not be able to enforce state laws on mosque property. In public hearings, these discriminatory comments

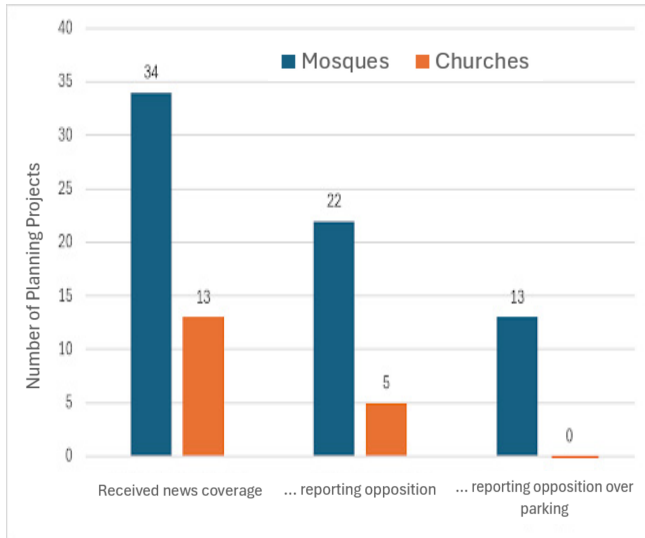


Figure 1. The portion of planning projects for 107 new mosques and 107 locally paired, new churches that received: any news coverage, coverage that included opposition, and coverage that included opposition specifically over parking. A much greater portion of mosques than churches received each type of news coverage.

are blended with practical concerns about too many cars, not enough parking, or blocked driveways and fire hydrants, suggesting that prejudice and parking concerns are conflated.

In summary, residents and officials across the country raise parking concerns that mask anti-Muslim prejudice and resistance to the construction of mosques. While some complaints about parking are made in good faith, they also serve as a disguise for prejudice, evidenced by our findings that the churches in our sample faced much less opposition, none of which was over parking. By studying parking, an example of a technical requirement, we reveal covert prejudice and how the seemingly neutral rules and bureaucratic practices of cities can be unjustly used for exclusion.

Policy Implications

Our research points to a structural problem in discretionary land-use processes. Technical requirements, such as those around parking, are not neutral. They create opportunities for unequal treatment and prejudicial opposition to otherwise permissible religious development.

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Eliminating requirements that new developments provide a minimum amount of parking would remove one avenue for such opposition. For places of worship, these minimum parking requirements are largely irrelevant to parking supply because mosques and churches normally build more parking than required under code. Instead, the existence of a parking requirement legitimizes discussions over what would be a sufficient number of spaces, opens avenues for prejudicial debate during public hearings, and gives local officials discretion to request ad hoc increases to parking requirements inconsistently and unequally. Since 2023, California has prohibited local governments from imposing minimum parking requirements on new development, but only for projects within one half-mile of major transit stops.

More broadly, giving city and county staff the authority to approve projects that meet clearly defined standards, without the need for public hearings before a planning commission or city council hearing, can reduce opportunities for prejudice to influence permitting decisions. Although city officials can shut down or disregard openly discriminatory comments at public hearings, it is much harder to assess whether concerns over parking—and, by extension, other technical issues such as traffic and water—reflect genuine concerns or serve as proxies for underlying prejudice. While our findings are specific to mosques, a similar shift towards staff-level approval could reduce discrimination against other proposed developments where prejudice is likely to fuel opposition, such as synagogues, Sikh temples, homeless shelters, and affordable housing.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the article “The Religion of Parking: How Land Use Planning Enables Anti-Muslim Prejudice” by Mark Fathi Massoud, Adam Millard-Ball, and Huzaifa Shahbaz in *Journal of the American Planning Association*. The article can be found online here: www.ucts.org/research-project/2024-40/. For more information about findings presented in this brief, please contact Mark Fathi Massoud, Professor of Politics, University of California, Santa Cruz, at mmassoud@ucsc.edu.