

NEWS

Redesigned Niskayuna Holocaust memorial gets OK

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A new rendering of the proposed Capital Region Jewish Holocaust Memorial that was posted on the Town of Niskayuna's website in spring 2019.

Town of Niskayuna

NISKAYUNA – After more than a year of community conversations, the Town Board unanimously approved a special use permit for the redesigned Holocaust memorial on Troy-Schenectady Road on Thursday. The project will now go back to the Planning Board for final approval.

"The project itself has its own personal, intrinsic value," Michael Lozman, a Latham-based orthodontist, who proposed the memorial on two acres of land off Route 7 donated by the Albany Roman Catholic Diocese. "It serves everybody. it's not just a Jewish memorial, it's a memorial for all those killed due to hatred and prejudice. It speaks for everyone. Because of that, it deserves a place and it found a place and that's wonderful and I'm delighted."

Most residents and faith leaders who spoke at the Town Board meeting supported the need for a Holocaust memorial and appreciated its redesign, but some neighbors protested against the location on Route 7, which they said they have been fighting for years to keep residential.

But Lozman said the location was meaningful because the Catholic church and Jewish community working together was "history in the making." One resident called it an act of reconciliation.

Gay Griffith, a Jewish resident who wore a t-shirt with an American flag and a Star of David, said she was the descendant of Holocaust survivors and her sons have been victims of anti-Semitic slurs in Niskayuna schools.

"The town has a historic opportunity to make this memorial a reality, to be the place in the Capital district that recognizes the importance of this history so that we do really never forget and make sure it never happens again," she said.

Dr. Paul Uppal, on the board of trustees at the Guru Nanak Darbar Sikh temple of Niskayuna and a member of interfaith group Schenectady Clergy Against Hate,

urged the town to make it a reality.

"As visitors to the site tour it and sit there and ponder what happened and recognize the cruelty of it, they will come to the realization that the hate, bigotry and intolerance that brought out this infamous affront to humanity must never again be repeated," Uppal said.

After the original design that included a box car and model gas chamber got pushback from residents at a public hearing last April, Lozman regrouped. Neil Golub, head of Price Chopper, began coordinating meetings every couple of weeks with a dozen members from Lozman's Capital District Jewish Holocaust Memorial group and the Jewish Federation of Northeastern New York headed by Robert Kovach. The group consulted architects, educators and the Anti-Defamation League's Holocaust education program.

Last month, the group unveiled a redesigned memorial and held two more public hearings. The re-design by Dembling & Dembling Architects features six sides like the points of the Star of David. It includes quotes from local survivors and pebbles that visitors can place to pay their respect, a common tradition in Jewish cemeteries. An arch over the memorial exit will read "Never Again."

Marina Franchild, a resident who is Jewish, said the first design "was very disturbing to me" but that she was moved to tears by the redesign. At first opposed to the project, she's changed her mind. But she did say there was a need for private security, not burdening the Niskayuna Police Department.

"I know there will be vandalism," she said.

Lozman said he would look into it. "The fact that it is even a concern points out the importance of something like this more so. If there's a problem in this society, we need to address it," he added.

Another resident suggested moving the memorial to the Jewish Community Center where it would be more visible. Although she agreed hateful attitudes need to change, she questioned whether a memorial was the only – or most effective – way to do that.

"Due to the cultural, emotional, and system complexities in our society, I believe psychologists, doctors and those in the mental health field are truly equipped to combat the growing hatred against humanity," she said.

Neighbors also questioned the location.

"It didn't matter to me what it looked like. I appreciated that somebody wanted to do something like that. I just didn't want to see a zoning change," said one man who moved onto the road 77 years ago and teared up when he said his mother was "ever vigilant" to keep the road residential.

The special use permit for the property at 2501 Troy Schenectady Road is contingent on addressing traffic concerns. There will be a thick vegetative buffer to limit impact on neighbors. Permanent restrooms will be built.

Lozman said he will begin fundraising, but doesn't have an estimate of how much it will cost or how long it will take to build.

Written by

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