

[Confusion and Outcry Deny Georgia Temple Use of Lands](#)

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When Ajodia Persaud went to the meeting of the Gwinnett Country Board of Commissioners on December 20th, 1988, he was reasonably confident that his society would get the special permission it sought to build a temple in this suburban area of Atlanta, Georgia. There were a large number of people at the public hearing, he noted upon entering, but he figured they were there for some other issue. It came as a great shock (one he has hardly recovered from to this day) to discover that some one-hundred irate Gwinnett county residents had shown up there to voice their "vehement opposition" to the temple. According to the meeting minutes, the chairman had only just begun the discussion when there was such an uproar in the chamber that one commissioner, Mr. Suffridge, stated, "If you are all going to be nasty, I am going to leave now."

The meeting did calm down, but the inexperienced and unprepared Hindus were overwhelmed by the homeowners' attack. The commissioners denied the temple a special use permit. It was a disastrous end to a series of disasters in public relations and land-use technicalities.

On the brighter side, the temple society has already recovered from the setback and is searching, according to Persaud, for a five-acre site which will not require special county permission for the temple. This happy ending has yet to be written, but the Atlanta experience is well worth recounting for the benefit of other temples seeking to build in local communities. This is not the first time that a Hindu temple has been denied special zoning permission in situations where there is reason to believe a more skillful approach could have brought a different outcome.

It would be easy to chalk the whole unseemly Atlanta episode up to blatant racism. This is, after all, Georgia-heart of the Deep South, buckle on the Bible Belt, where most Christian churches remain segregated into all-black and all-white congregations. Gwinnett county in particular is 95% white in a state 25% black.

"Off the record" just about every local resident HINDUISM TODAY spoke with said there was a strong racist element in the opposition to the Hindu temple. But at least the Ku Klux Klan wasn't burning crosses on anyone's lawn, and it's only fair to say that a lot of people who opposed the temple did so for reasons not based on racial prejudice. Perhaps they are prejudice against what they don't know or don't understand, but that is different.

Here's how the story unfolded. Over a year ago, Ajodia Persaud found a piece of land in the Atlanta suburb of Lilburn. Thinking it would make a good home and place for a large garden, he purchased the four-acre lot and house for \$135,000. According to Persaud, he cleared a portion of the land to plant a garden. Standing one day on the cleared spot with Dr. Deen Chandora, fellow member of the Greater Atlantic Vedic Temple Society, Persaud said they were inspired that this could be the place to build the temple they had so long wanted. A decision was quickly reached to lease the site from Persaud and build the temple there. Anxious to get the ball rolling and money coming in, the group hastily organized a ground-breaking ceremony to coincide with the September 11th, 1988, visit of His Holiness, Paramahansa Swami Maheshwarananda, who maintains an ashram in Vienna, Austria. Announcements of this event were distributed throughout the neighborhood and were the first notice many local residents had that a temple was planned for the site.

This rather simple series of events effectively sealed the fate of the temple as far as the local community was concerned. To understand why, it is important to first understand American zoning regulations. These regulations vary with each locality and are designed to permit controlled use of the land. Thus, certain areas are designated for residences, others for businesses, still others for industry. Just about anything can and is specified in zoning regulations, including fencing, landscaping, building height, etc. Temples come under the same regulations as churches. In some towns, churches can be built anywhere, in most, however, specific requirements must be met or a "special use permit" issued. That permit requires a review by county officials, a public hearing and a vote by a county, and sometimes a state, commission. It's during this public hearing process that opposition can and often does occur. The typical arguments are heavier traffic and increased use of public services such as water and sewage.

The current land owners of most neighborhoods are frequently suspicious of any new development, fearful that it will lessen the value of their property. In the cases of church construction, this is often true, for land adjacent to a church is valued less highly. Much opposition stems from this property value issue. But loss of

property value itself is not usually a sufficient reason to have a special use permit denied. Hence the introduction of other reasons, such as traffic.

The final shoot-out over the Vedic Temple's special use permit occurred at the December 20th public hearing. The principle opponent of the temple was the South Gwinnett Home Owner's Alliance. It is frequently involved in zoning issues such as this. Armed with a petition with 314 signatures against the temple, their representative, Mr. Randy Dresher, Jr., launched a skillful barrage of well-prepared objections: "We want you to know," he told the commission, "that applicant decimated the trees and clear-cut this property without a grading permit, and this was done prior to applying for this special use permit...The applicant has presented a number of conflicting stories which have had the effect of deceiving neighbors as to the true intentions for property use...The applicant has already clearly demonstrated little to no regard for the privacy and rights of the neighborhood...Traffic hazards would undoubtedly increase in an area already beset by hazards, curbs, steep grades and numerous accidents...Applicant's proposed 20-foot buffer is totally inadequate to protect the home-owner's interest, especially considering how the trees have been raped from the property already." Temple member Vishnu Whutemburg, who was at the hearing, said the temple representatives were "totally unprepared and complete novices," unable to answer the charges.

Seeking to understand the opposition to the temple, HINDUISM TODAY interviewed Mrs. Donna Fisher, a member of the Alliance who spoke against the temple at a preliminary Planning Commission meeting. Mrs. Fisher is a former school teacher and full-time mother of three. She minored in religion for her degree and taught at a black college for five years. Often active in zoning disputes, she was once nearly involved in filing a lawsuit against her own church for zoning violations. She told HINDUISM TODAY, "What upset me was that these people did not know enough about our laws, customs and procedures. I think it was a sad thing to happen." She admitted that the alliance "did not expect to win...If they had left the land wooded, the homeowners would have been overruled." "It was certainly not an issue of being prejudice against Hinduism," she claimed, "the temple encroached on the rights of the neighbors...Totally raped the land, cut every single tree down."

The tree clearing was a central issue and set the emotional tone of the proceedings. Since Persaud personally owned the land at the time of the clearing, and only later conceived the idea of leasing it to the temple, he was clearly within his rights to remove trees. But the local people, including the county planning department, interpreted the land clearing as a first step in the construction of the

temple, a step requiring county permits. Then when the groundbreaking was held on the heels of the land clearing, the community felt they were being misled. Neighbors inquiring about the site received different answers-that the clearing was for a garden, for a family gathering or for a second house. All legal reasons, but the subsequent confusion raised a great deal of suspicion and hostility and ultimately led to the temple's defeat.

As the Vedic temple members are first to admit, they went into the proceedings blindly. Their inexperienced handling of the county regulations and public relations with the local residents left them facing overwhelming opposition. The Livermore, California, Siva/Vishnu temple and the New Jersey Swaminarayan Fellowship faced similar problems. Analysis of these experiences reveals two central rules for establishing a temple and successfully ingratiating it with the existing community.

The first rule is careful attention to public relations. Every effort must be made to meet both residents and community leaders, such as ministers. Considering the misinformed press Hindus often receive in America, it may well be necessary to re-educate people about Hinduism (perhaps with a few issues of HINDUISM TODAY!).

The second rule is for the temple to seek the advice of professionals who are experts in their area's land-use laws. One kind of expert is a lawyer who specializes in real-estate law. Lawyers cost money, but properly chosen ones will earn their own fees through sound counsel. With this expert advice, the temple can carefully plan its entire development right from the first acquisition of the land to the kumbhabhishekam.

Finally, when opposition occurs, it is easy to fall back upon cries of "racism" and "bigotry." But the long-term effect of such tactics is only to harden feelings and prevent true amalgamation with the community-if the temple is ever built. The wiser course is to follow the land-use laws precisely and to educate and make friends with the local community.

With these and other lessons under its belt, the Atlanta temple society can now more knowledgeable procure an appropriate site to build upon their community's temple.

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