

# Despite opposition, plans move ahead for Somali mall in Minneapolis

Some call Council Member Abdi Warsame's efforts a political maneuver.

By Miguel Otárola (<http://www.startribune.com/miguel-otarola/396828811/>) Star Tribune |

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Abdi Warsame came to the community center to talk about his vision for Africa Village, his long-envisioned mall for Minneapolis' East African hub. He never got the chance.

Protesters [shouted and hoisted signs the moment](http://www.startribune.com/protesters-shut-down-meeting-over-african-market-in-minneapolis-cedar-riverside-neighborhood/558880932/)

(<http://www.startribune.com/protesters-shut-down-meeting-over-african-market-in-minneapolis-cedar-riverside-neighborhood/558880932/>) the two-term City Council member entered the crowded room that night in August. He stood above his supporters in an attempt to address them, but gave up within a few minutes.

A month later, at a coffee shop downtown, Warsame dismissed the opposition that night as “a little passionate discourse between the community.”

“No project has ever been done in the East African community in the city of Minneapolis, even though this community has now lived in the city for 30 years,” he said. “This is the first kind of project that is about this community. Obviously there’s going to be a lot of passion.”

That passion has enveloped the conversation surrounding Africa Village ever since Warsame [announced plans for the market this summer](http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-leaders-announce-plan-for-new-east-african-market-in-cedar-riverside-neighborhood/511976952/)

(<http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-leaders-announce-plan-for-new-east-african-market-in-cedar-riverside-neighborhood/511976952/>) with Mayor Jacob Frey, who was hustled out of the same public meeting. The mall would be built on a city-owned parking lot near the intersection of S. 4th Street and Cedar Avenue.

A vocal group of mothers, young leaders and business owners [have decried the idea](http://www.startribune.com/plans-for-african-market-in-minneapolis-cedar-riverside-not-welcomed-by-all/523199241/) (<http://www.startribune.com/plans-for-african-market-in-minneapolis-cedar-riverside-not-welcomed-by-all/523199241/>), saying the mall would threaten existing businesses and do nothing for the more serious need of curbing youth violence and drug use.

Warsame has stood firm on his idea to build Africa Village, the focal point of his 2017 re-election campaign. He contends that virtually the entire Somali community supports him. Frey has also stood by his side.

Last week, Warsame announced that several major organizations, including the African Development Center of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota, signed on to the concept. Warsame says the mall could include a clinic, housing, a space for youth programming and more.

He spoke Sept. 29 at a much friendlier gathering of African immigrants eager to move into the market once it’s completed.

“This is bigger than a souk [marketplace]. What we’re talking about is the future of this city that we live in,” he told the crowd in Somali. “Africa Village will be a shield that will prevent gentrification and the displacement of Cedar-Riverside residents who have spent 25 years in this neighborhood and whose efforts have improved its safety.”

Yet others believe the market is a political maneuver, one that has barreled through without seeking feedback from those who live and work in the neighborhood.

Russom Solomon, co-owner of the Red Sea restaurant beside the parking lot and vice president of the West Bank Business Association, considered himself to be a friend of Warsame, helping him fundraise for his election campaign. Now he’s worried about

there being hidden intentions for project, saying Warsame is “hellbent to get a mall.”

“The problem with democracy is that you really have to appease everybody, you have to work with everybody,” Solomon said. He said Warsame has not done so.

Sisco Omar, a 22-year-old community organizer who protested during the open house in August, said Warsame should have met with residents worried about the massive change the mall could bring to Cedar-Riverside.

“He’s just pushing this — no engagement,” Omar said.

A request for proposals is expected to go out in mid-October, Warsame said. Meanwhile, the mobilizing in support and opposition continues.

The Cedar Riverside Neighborhood Revitalization Program is calling for the city to delay the request and first seek proper feedback in the neighborhood, said Dave Alderson, the organization’s co-executive director.

On the other side, a group of East African women has championed Warsame’s mission, collecting hundreds of signatures in support of the mall and organizing the Sept. 29 event where Warsame spoke.

Marian Hersi, a longtime Cedar-Riverside resident, said the idea of a new mall in her neighborhood is reviving her dream of becoming a business owner. Hersi, who grew up selling bread and tomatoes on the streets of Somalia, has been working as a janitor for Macy’s in Edina for the last 17 years. But once the mall opens, she said she wants to own a convenience store.

“For a long time, people have been discouraging us, saying that Abdi Warsame is using this for his campaign and that it’s all lies,” said the 48-year-old mother of four. “But already Abdi Warsame and his team have shown that they are doing something for us.”

Like Warsame, Frey said he has heard from “countless residents in the East African community” about the need for a space for community members. The mayor said Warsame has been a good partner and leader in that effort.

“We’ve heard for years from the community at-large the need for collaborative and economic development space,” Frey said. “I see a path forward that allows for both the right amount of engagement and generation of consensus. I fully see that possibility.

The market, Warsame said, is “not a zero-sum game.” Its development won’t take away from other aspects of Cedar-Riverside that the city is looking to address, he said.

“This project is not a panacea. It’s not going to solve every single problem the community has,” Warsame said. “But these problems exist. And I hope that they continue to be voiced, even after this project is done.”

Staff writer Faiza Mahamud contributed to this report.

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