

MINNEAPOLIS

Sale of Minneapolis park land for Islamic cultural center still possible, Park Board says

Mpls. Park Board told the center's supporters that a deal is still possible.

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

APRIL 1, 2019 — 7:45PM

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board is still open to talking about selling parkland to a local Islamic community center, a month after a meeting on the subject ended with shouts from the public.

The Masjid Salaam Cultural Center, located off Central Avenue and St. Anthony Parkway in northeast Minneapolis, has for years wanted to buy parkland next to the center and turn it into a parking lot. Its members say an adjacent parking lot will be safer for children coming in and out of the building.

A board committee meeting March 6 abruptly ended when members of the local Muslim community accused it of Islamophobia and racism.

Board officials, including Superintendent Al Bangoura, have since met with the mosque's elders to explain the process and let them know there's still an opportunity to discuss the sale.

"Everything is a process," Bangoura said, citing the time, staffing and community engagement it would take to sell land. "I think the biggest thing for them ... is to really understand what that looks like."

The board has rarely sold or disposed of land since 2000, and Board President Brad Bourn had previously said (<http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-park-board-flexes-its-muscle-in-face-of-requests-for-public-land/488952411/>) it was unlikely it would sell this property to the center. It would require amending the park's master plan, which looked at possibly adding seating or public art on the space.

Mohamed Amin, a community activist who spoke up during the meeting, said building a parking lot would serve the public good.

"What matters is every kid is important," he said. "We have to protect the kids."

Colleen O'Connor Toberman, a board member of the Northeast Investment Cooperative, said the organization had once looked to buy the property where the cultural center now stands. They ended up passing on it, partly because of the lack of public parking.

"It was really clear to us that the Park Board policy would not allow a land transfer like that for a parking lot," she said. "I'm confused why another party is being given the impression that that might be flexible."

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Park Superintendent Al Bangoura

