

Debate Over Islam Divides a Texas County

Darlene McCormick Sanchez

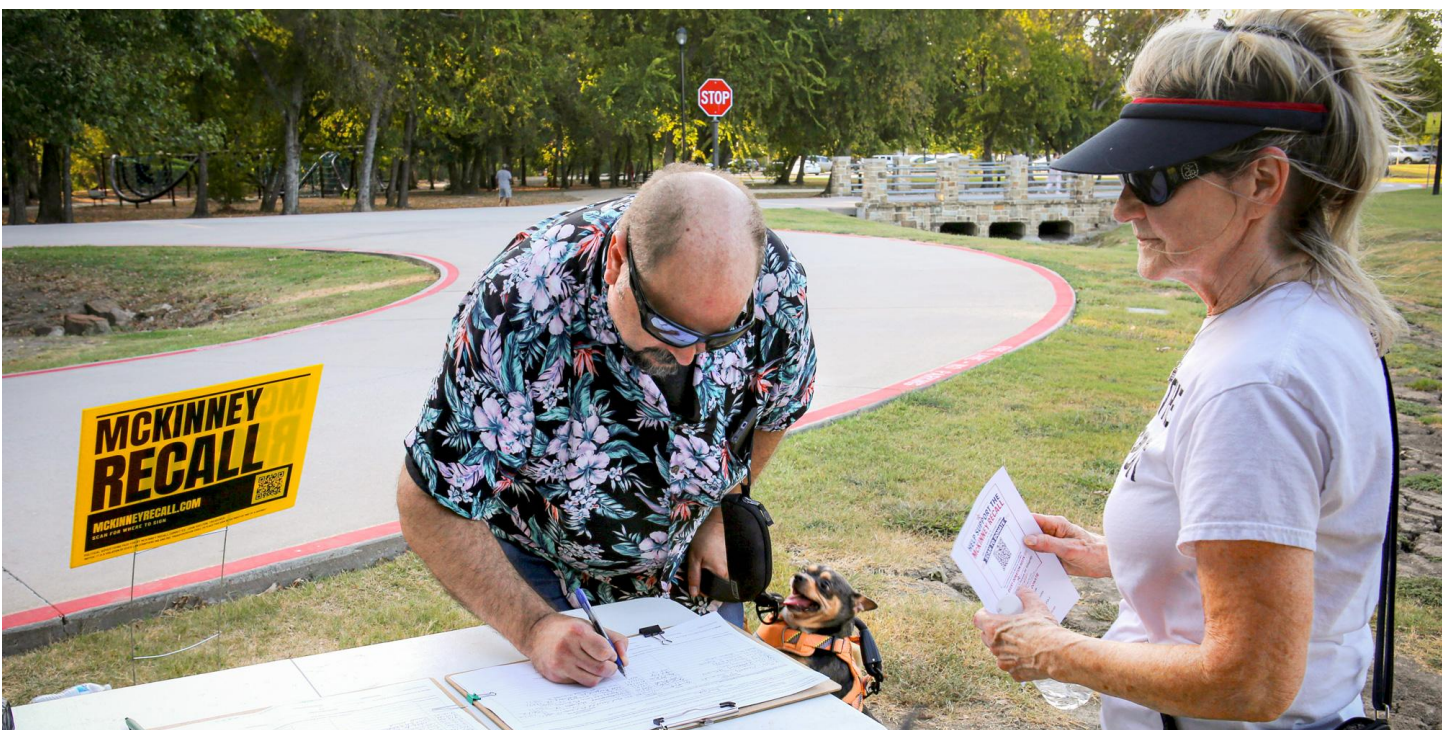
McKINNEY, Texas—In Collin County, home to a growing Muslim population, McKinney residents successfully gathered signatures to recall city council members and the mayor who approved a mosque site plan after a tense public meeting in August.

A few miles south, on the 25th anniversary of 9/11, protesters gathered outside a Plano mosque, waving American flags and holding signs about Jesus and “Don’t Mecca My Texas,” as Muslims passed by on their way to prayer.

To the east in the rural part of the county, what’s known as EPIC city, a 1,000-home Muslim development, anchored by a mosque, remains on hold. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton sued to stop construction amid public concerns that the enclave would promote sharia, or Islamic law.

Muslims say their freedom to believe is a fundamental right protected by the Constitution and dismiss the opposition as political opportunism or plain bigotry. Those who oppose the mosque have concerns about Islam’s political aspects, radical Islamic extremism, or the sense that Islam doesn’t belong in a nation built on Christian values.

Perhaps nowhere in Texas has the argument over whether Islam is a religion or political ideology been so visible as in Collin County, part of the suburban sprawl north of Dallas. The rapid Muslim growth here has met robust local opposition at a time when some Republicans in Texas and on the national stage have made a campaign issue out of opposing Islam’s political aspects.





A resident signs a recall petition in McKinney, Texas, on Sept. 15, 2026. Activists have been gathering signatures to recall city council members who approved a mosque site plan. Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times

Cowboy Country and Islam

Texas—land of cowboys, ranches, and barbecue—was home to 224 mosques in 2020, the third-largest number in the nation behind New York and California. Some estimates now put that Texas number closer to 300.

224

MOSQUES

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Collin County has seen a sharp rise in Muslim adherents, up from around 6,000 in 2000 to more than 37,000 in 2020, according to one religious survey.

But as more Muslims settle in the red state of Texas, strife over Islam as a political movement has grown and is increasingly reflected in election campaigns. Critics call it Islamophobia; others call the concerns justifiable.

A recent headline in The New York Times summed up the friction with a provocative article titled

“Islamophobia’s Rise in Texas.”

The story outlined a terrorist threat at a new Islamic center in Houston, a Conroe woman who told Muslim shoppers at a grocery store they weren’t welcome, and anti-Muslim sentiment over the mosque expansion in McKinney.

At the August McKinney City Council meeting, Ashley Marie Loudon spoke out.

She vowed to launch a recall against elected officials who, she said, have repeatedly ignored the will of their constituents. Their unanimous vote to approve the new mosque site plan was the last straw.



Ashley Marie Loudon, an activist opposed to the building of a new mosque, stands at the proposed construction site in McKinney, Texas, on Sept. 15, 2026. Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times

“When the city council stops answering to the people, the people have a duty to act,” Loudon said during the city council meeting. “It’s time to start organizing a recall on every member who has chosen cowardice and silence [over] accountability.”

She told the Epoch Times her phone blew up after the city council approved a site plan for the mosque expansion in a busy area of town.

Loudon said that characterizing resistance to a mosque expansion as mere Islamophobia dismisses valid public concerns.



A lot of people are starting to see what radical Islam comes with, and they have every right to be concerned.

Ashley Marie Loudon, resident, McKinney, Texas

Take, for example, Iran's Islamic caliphate chanting "Death to America" for almost 50 years. More recently, popular Muslim influencers such as Hasan Piker have proclaimed America "deserved 9/11."

"I think a lot of residents, and I just think as a nation, a lot of people are starting to see what radical Islam comes with, and they have every right to be concerned because it's not something that we should just welcome in the name of not being Islamophobic," Loudon said.

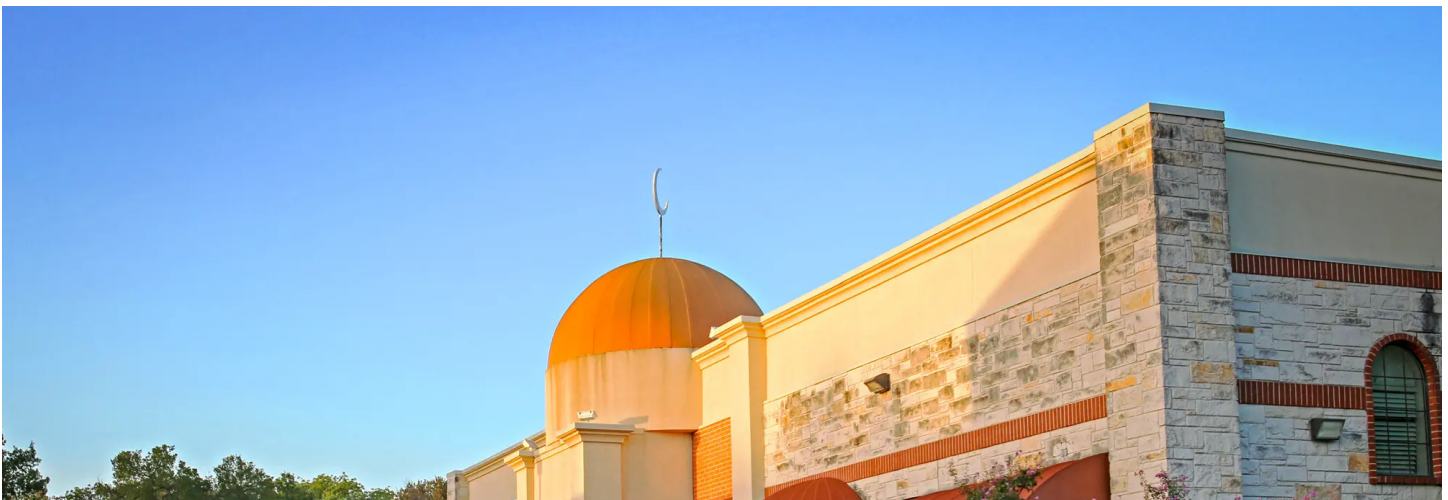
Character-Defining Moments

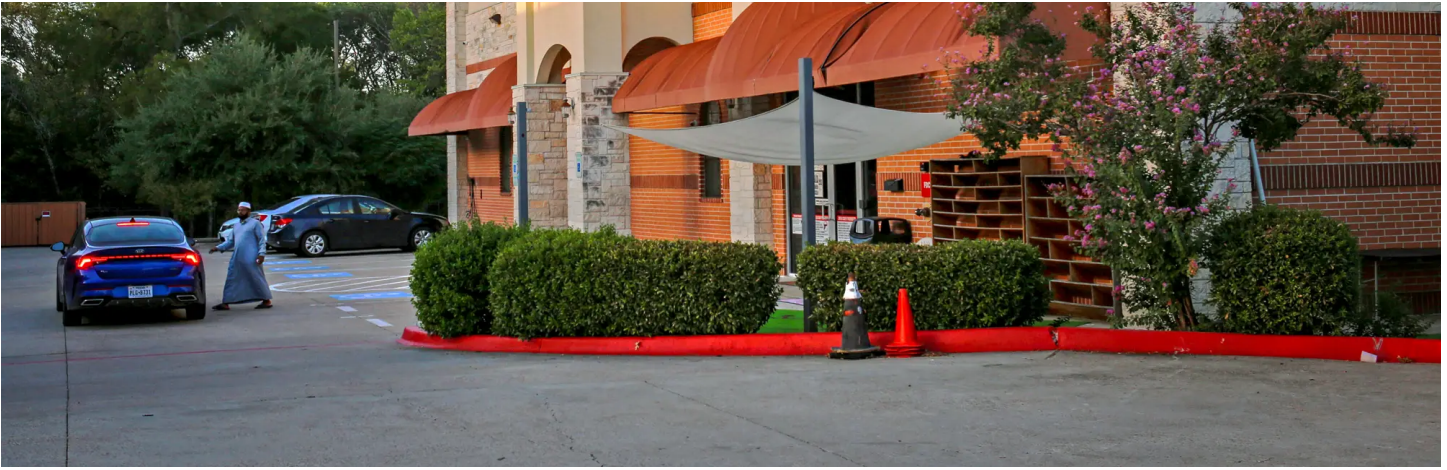
At the same McKinney city-council meeting, others said the freedom to build a house of worship is about as American as it gets. The meeting lasted more than four hours and attracted more than 100 people who signed up to speak.

Samad Syed brought a copy of the Constitution with him to the podium.

"This Constitution of America represents the greatest promise: that every person stands equal before the law; that our rights do not depend on our faith, our background, our popularity," he said.

"Tonight, this council is not deciding what kind of building belongs in McKinney. You're deciding what kind of city McKinney will be remembered as. ... Every generation has moments that define character."





A man walks outside the McKinney Islamic Association in McKinney, Texas, on Sept. 15, 2026. Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times

Others stood up in defense of their Muslim neighbors, saying they deserve to practice their religion just like anyone else in America.

“It’s very disappointing to hear all the racism, Islamophobia, and hate,” Kassey Stanfill said. “I have read the Quran and the Bible, and a lot of things said today were taken out of context.”

Mehdi Elofir, who sits on the board of the McKinney Islamic Association, told city leaders at the meeting that his association has met every requirement needed to expand the mosque, including studies on traffic, drainage, and environmental impact.

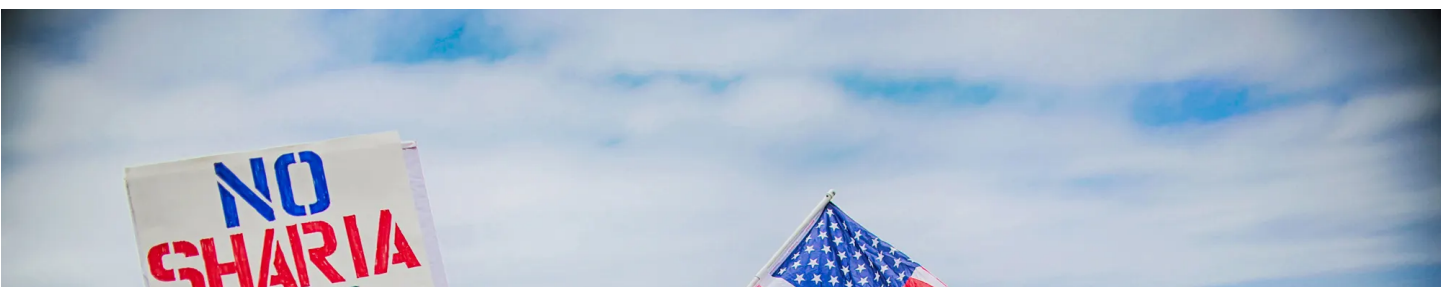
“This project has not been rushed,” he added, referring to the approximate 5.6-acre development consisting of a mosque, classroom building, and gym.

Religion or Political Ideology

Several commenters spoke about their experiences living abroad under sharia, saying it’s not compatible with America’s Constitution and that should give the council pause. Women are not treated as equals under sharia, and homosexuality is not tolerated, they said.

Sandra Sammons said she grew up in a Muslim country. She said Westerners don’t understand that mosques are more than religious centers; they’re Islam’s center of power.

Sharia operates under a different set of rules than Western Judeo-Christian values. “It dictates marriage, dietary laws, government, criminal and civil law, education—every area is governed by sharia law,” she said. “In Islam, there is no separation of church and state.”





Anti-sharia demonstrators march along the beach during a demonstration against the Islamic law in Oceanside, Calif., on June 10, 2017. Sandy Huffaker/AFP via Getty Images

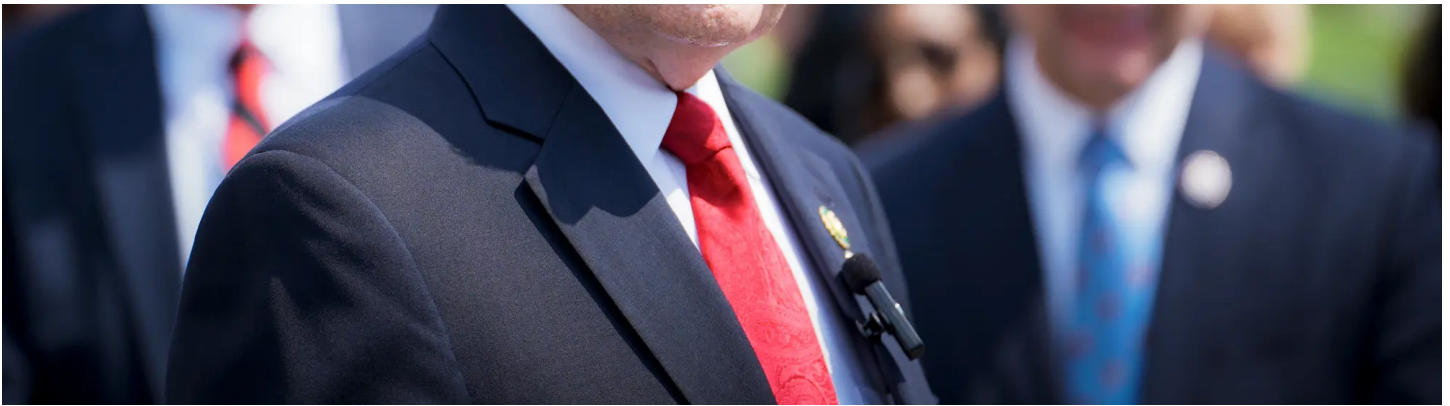
Federal and state elected officials also took their turn at the podium, extending the debate beyond local residents.

Rep. Keith Self (R-Texas) pointed to the British grooming gangs scandal involving mostly Muslim men who raped and abused young girls. He said authorities turned a blind eye to alleged crimes over concerns they would be accused of being racist or Islamophobic.

“Fourteen hundred years of political Islam—you can’t get away from it,” said Self, co-founder of the Sharia-Free America Caucus.

State Rep. Keresa Richardson, a Republican serving parts of Collin County, asked the council to delay site plan approval until the conclusion of a Texas investigation into a sharia tribunal operating in Dallas. A member of the McKinney Islamic Association advised the tribunal, Richardson said.





Rep. Keith Self (R-Texas) speaks at a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington on July 25, 2023. At a recent McKinney, Texas, city council meeting, Self said authorities sometimes turn a blind eye to alleged crimes over concerns about being accused of racism or Islamophobia. Madalina Vasiliu/The Epoch Times

The Dallas tribunal is accused of seeking “to replace actual courts of law and to evade neutral, generally applicable state and federal laws,” according to Paxton, who announced the investigation in an April 6 news release.

The McKinney Islamic Association did not respond to a request for comment from The Epoch Times.

The three separate buildings proposed for Virginia Parkway will total more than 32,000 square feet and provide more than 200 parking spaces.

Some residents showed up to question potential parking and traffic problems that could worsen congestion in the area, especially with school schedules.

They blamed the city council and mayor for a lack of transparency and for ignoring their concerns dating back a decade to a proposal to expand the McKinney airport.

‘A New Phenomenon’

The McKinney mosque wasn’t the only place getting pushback in Collin County. Plano was caught up in the debate as well.

On the anniversary of 9/11, the Lone Star Legionaries staged a “Stand With Texas” rally in a grassy area next to the Plano mosque.

Muslims who spoke with The Epoch Times blamed the backlash on a lack of understanding and the politics leading up

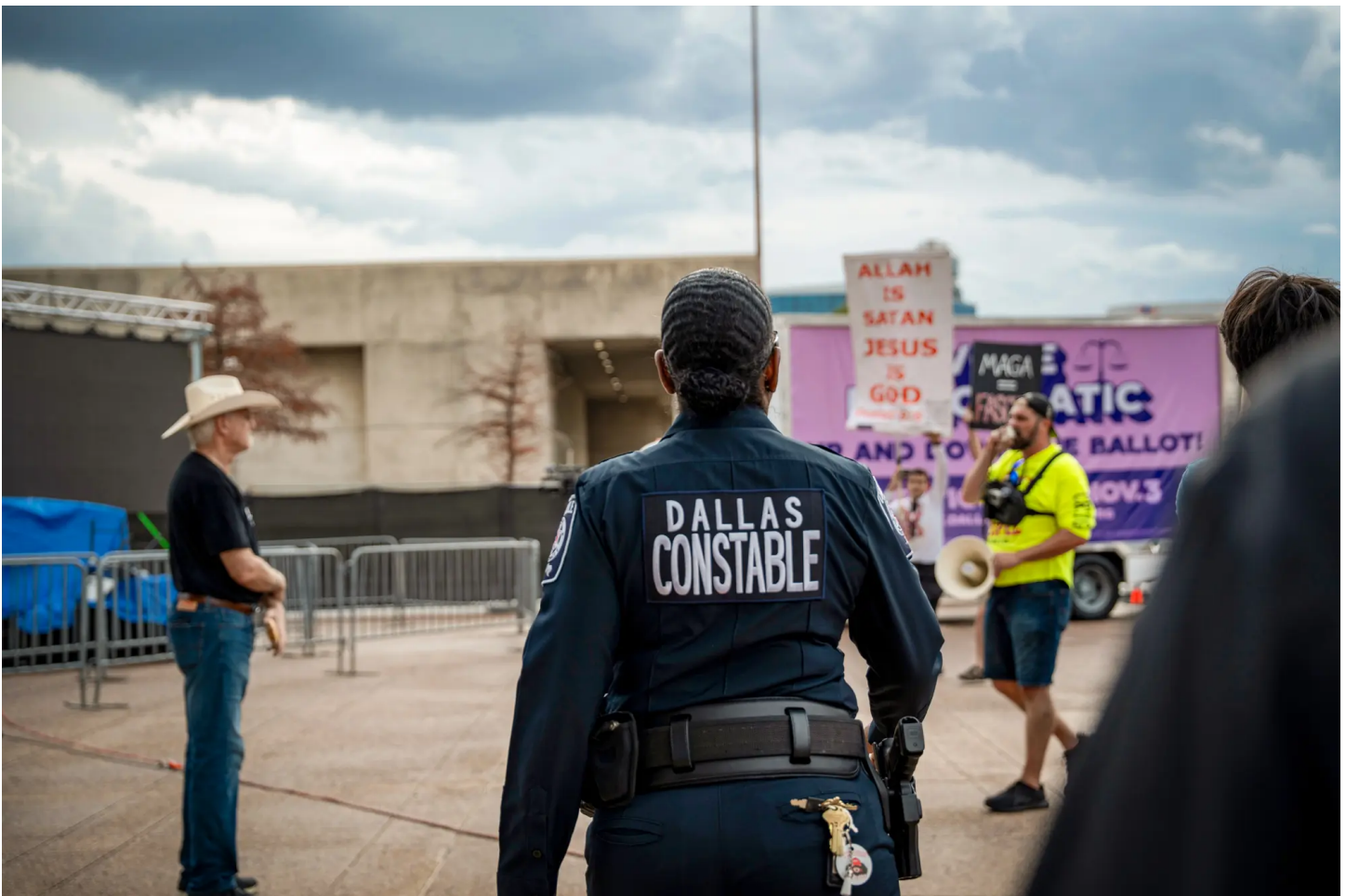
to midterm elections.

Police and security stood by as about 50 protesters held flags and banners in near triple-digit heat. A helicopter circled as counter-protesters lined the sidewalk leading to the mosque.

Dan Chandler, a Plano resident who attended the 9/11 protest, said Americans need only look to European countries such as the UK and Spain, which have seen large numbers of Muslim immigrants, to see their future.

“Islam is not a religion,” he told The Epoch Times. “It’s a ploy to take over the world and to take over Texas and America.”

About 40 yards away, Muslims streaming into the mosque thanked supporters who staged a counter-protest.



A Dallas County constable watches a pro-Trump protester at the We the People: Rally for Democracy in Dallas on Sept. 10, 2026. The rally was a counter-event to the Republican midterm convention occurring nearby. Republican candidates are tapping into unease over the rising Muslim population in Texas. Gabriela Passos/AP Photo

Cars occasionally honked for both sides.

“Thanks a lot. I really appreciate all of you coming,” one Muslim man told counter-protesters who were holding signs reading “Love Thy Neighbor,” “Safe Spaces for All Faiths,” and “Unite Don’t Divide.”

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There’ll always be some crazy state of mind.
If they want to know more, they should
come in and join.

Saif Islam, resident, Plano, Texas

Muslims who spoke with The Epoch Times seemed to take the backlash in stride, blaming it on a lack of understanding and the political season leading up to the midterm elections.

Saif Islam of Plano stopped to talk about the protest. He said people were misinformed about his religion and believes the protests are being driven by people running for office, not by fear of sharia or extremism.

“There’ll always be some crazy state of mind,” Islam said of the protesters. “If they want to know more, they should come in and join. We have open forum every Saturday.”





Plano, Texas, resident Saif Islam talks to The Epoch Times outside the Islamic Association of Collin County in Plano on Sept. 11, 2026. Darlene McCormick Sanchez/The Epoch Times

He said people have been given the wrong impression of his faith.

“I feel sorry [for] people of Jesus, who should be of love and compassion,” Islam said. “At least they should try minimally and attempt to get to know who these people are, rather than protesting.”

Saif Islam came from Bangladesh to America about 45 years ago. The Muslim community in the area has deep roots and friendships with Christians, Hindus, and others, he said.

“We share their parking lot,” he said of a neighboring church. “They share our parking lot. I mean, unprecedented friendship we have, locally.”

Akram Syed, president of the Islamic Association of Collin County, said the Plano mosque where the protest was held had been in the neighborhood for 25 years.

Syed called the protest unusual and chalked it up to the “political theater.”

“This is a new phenomenon for us,” he said, adding that he thought politicians were looking for a “boogeyman” to help them win elections.





Dan Chandler of Plano holds a pro-recall sign during a rally outside the Islamic Association of Collin County in Plano, Texas, on Sept. 11, 2026, the 25th anniversary of the World Trade Center terrorist attack in New York City. Darlene McCormick Sanchez/The Epoch Times

Recalls and Lawsuits

Louden said the recall petition involves Mayor Bill Cox and three council members whose terms don't expire next year: Ernest Lynch, Geré Feltus, and Justin Beller.

The reason for the recall as stated on the petition was “a loss of public confidence in the ability of the officers named herein to faithfully represent the citizens of the City of McKinney.”

Beller addressed the sometimes raucous crowd before the vote.

“I think [Muslims have] earned and deserve a little trust that they'll do right by you as their neighbors,” he said.



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who determined our circumstances, ...
and now it feels like we're here again.
But the Muslims are king.

Julie Simons, resident, McKinney, Texas

Beller said politicians are “fear-mongering” that Muslims who have lived in the community for years will somehow become a threat if a new mosque is built.

None of those facing recall responded to an Epoch Times request for comment.

Council members have defended their decision, arguing the city would be sued if it denied the mosque expansion.

Resident Julie Simons said she was worried about traffic in the area during Muslim holy days such as Ramadan. She expressed frustration with a council that deemed itself “powerless.”

“If you’re powerless—you represent us—which means we’re powerless,” she said.

“This is our country’s 250th birthday. We left England, where there was a king who determined our circumstances, our consequences, our destinies, and now it feels like we’re here again. But the Muslims are king.”







(Left) Activist Ashley Marie Loudon stands at the site of a proposed mosque in McKinney, Texas, on Sept. 15, 2026. (Right) Locations to sign a petition to recall McKinney City Council members who voted to allow for a mosque expansion are shown on a phone in Plano, Texas, on Sept. 11, 2026. Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times, Darlene Sanchez/The Epoch Times

John Aselton, who helped organize the recall petition, said it stems from a loss of confidence in McKinney elected officials. The mosque vote was part of a broader pattern, he said.

“The main point of the recall is not that you should be afraid of your local government; they should be afraid of you,” he told The Epoch Times.

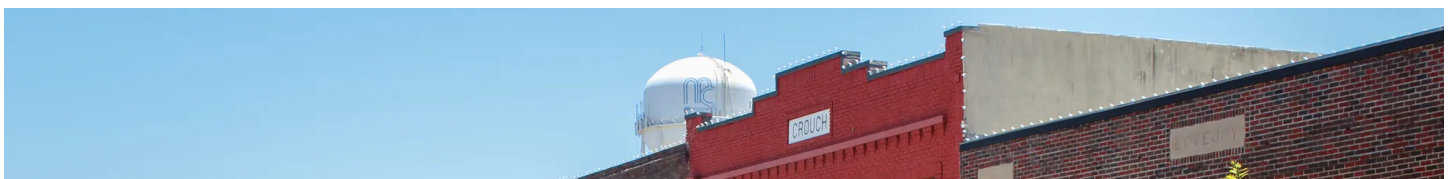
Louden said the petition drive gathered about 7,600 signatures—more than the required 5,805.

The city secretary must certify the signatures. If the city council members don’t step down, the council must order a recall election.

Tensions over the recall were apparent during a recent visit to Bonnie Wenk Park in Collin County, where several people stopped by to sign the petition.

One petition organizer, who declined to give his name, grew agitated when asked how many signatures had been gathered that day, fearing that revealing the numbers would embolden the opposition.

That’s because the petition has faced pushback, leading to accusations of voter intimidation, with Collin County Citizens for Integrity filing a complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice.





Historic downtown McKinney, Texas. Rick Ray/CC BY-SA 2.0

A Muslim City

Controversy over mosques isn't new to Collin County.

Last year, the proposed EPIC City development outside of Josephine, a rural area about 15 miles southeast of McKinney, was heralded as the “epicenter of Islam in America.” The development was named for the East Plano Islamic Center (EPIC).

In addition to a mosque, the EPIC development would include a K–12 faith-based school, sports facilities, a community college, senior housing, an outreach center, and businesses.

The battle over building the Muslim-centric neighborhood garnered national attention.

Numerous public officials and community members have worked to halt the development, citing concerns about sharia, assimilation, and potential ties to foreign Islamic groups.

Following backlash at the local, state, and federal levels, it changed its name to The Meadow.

Paxton announced a lawsuit in late 2025 against EPIC, as well as developer Community Capital Partners and others, alleging violations of Texas securities laws. The lawsuit also claimed that the housing development would be illegally reserved for Muslim residents.





An image shows a rendering of the EPIC City project, now called The Meadow, proposed to be built outside rural Josephine, Texas. Republican leaders have spoken out against the proposed 402-acre Muslim development. Office of the Texas Attorney General

Backers denounced the legal action as Islamophobic and are defending their right to build the community near Josephine. The development remains on hold.

As Goes Texas

Republicans campaigning in the Lone Star State are tapping into public unease over the rapid increase in the Muslim population and fear of Islamic law.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who is running for reelection this fall, has made banning sharia a core pillar of his campaign, like other conservatives seeking office.



We are not waiting on Washington, D.C.
We will fully ban sharia law in Texas.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott

Abbott designated the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)—a Muslim civil rights and advocacy group that denied the accusation—and the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist groups last year.

He promoted laws banning developments “from creating sharia compounds and defrauding and discriminating against Texans.”

At the Republican midterm convention held in Dallas in September, Abbott leaned into the message against political Islam.



Texas Gov. Greg Abbott speaks on stage on the second day of the 2026 Republican National Convention in Dallas on Sept. 10, 2026. Like other conservatives seeking office in Texas, Abbott has made banning sharia a core pillar of his campaign. Alex Wong/Getty Images

“We are not waiting on Washington, D.C. We will fully ban sharia law in Texas,” he said.

Evidence suggests Washington is paying attention.

“Religious belief is inviolate. Conduct that functions as a political system is not,” Self told a House Judiciary subcommittee in May.

“The Constitution guarantees equal rights, due process, and individual liberty, while sharia assigns legal distinctions among individuals and bases authority on religious mandates.”

The Trump administration designated three international branches of the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist

organizations earlier this year—the first administration to do so.

During an August interview with conservative radio host Glenn Beck, President Donald Trump said the influence of sharia law in London and Paris has created “almost like a second way of life.”

“I would absolutely prohibit the sharia law thing. It is happening in this country a little bit, and where we see it, we take it out,” he said.

“We have one system.”