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Poughkeepsie Journal

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When it comes to religion, questions of diversity raise complex issues



Julio Mundo of Circleville prays during a Sunday service at the Encounter Church in New Windsor on Jan. 24. SETH HARRISON/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

DIVIDED IN FAITH

Lana Bellamy and Saba Ali
Poughkeepsie Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

It's Sunday in Newburgh, and Pastor J. Edward Lewis prepares to deliver his weekly sermon to congregants at a Revolutionary War-era church on South Street.

The history of Calvary Presbyterian Church — located less than a mile from George Washington's Headquarters — and Lewis' significance as its first Black leader is not lost on him. The church is becoming more diverse, and he is happy to be part of its evolution.

Across the Hudson, leaders of two churches less than 20 minutes apart — one mostly Black, the other

mostly white — say their congregational makeup is the result of choices by their worshippers. Perhaps it is easier to feel at peace, more secure, when surrounded by people who look and think alike, said the Rev. Paul Lent of Freedom Plains United Presbyterian Church in LaGrangeville.

In nearby New Windsor, Pastor Anthony Mugnano and his wife, Veronica, welcome congregants into Encounter Church. Spiritual music greets worshippers as they file into the pews. An older man enters with a Make America Great Again hat on, discarding it before he sits down. Another blows a shofar, a horn usually associated with Judaism. Some people are wearing jeans, including Mugnano. With its slogan,

See FAITH DIVIDED, Page 4A

Why diversity within mosques often fails to unite

Saba Ali Poughkeepsie Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Najah Imani Muhammad stood on the step of the city of Poughkeepsie post office and spoke into a bullhorn on the anniversary of George Floyd's death.

Muhammad is Black, but she wasn't there to speak about the growing list of people who have died at the hands of police.

She stood before a crowd of men, women and children who had walked past city hall flying Palestinian flags and chanting for the end of Israel's occupation of Palestinian land.

"As a kid, I didn't understand (about Palestine). As an adult, two weeks ago, ashamedly so, I still don't understand," Muhammad told the crowd. "But what I understand is being the other."

She was referring to her experience within her mosque.

See DIVERSITY, Page 3A



Veronica Galimore and Abdul-Karim Nasr, with the Masjid Al-Mutakabbir in Poughkeepsie, are with Shakira Shah from the Masjid Al-Noor in Wappingers Falls. MARK VERGARI/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

How Dutchess schools plan to use federal grant funding

Katelyn Cordero
Poughkeepsie Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

School districts across Dutchess County plan to use funding through the American Rescue Plan to address learning losses, provide social and emotional support, and invest in infrastructure.

Some have earmarked money to run expanded summer programs for elementary and middle school students, as well as extended day programs next year.

But, despite a July 1 requirement set in the state budget to post plans, most district across the Hudson Valley appeared to be lagging, as of midweek.

While several districts around Dutchess have presented their plans at school board meetings and town halls, few have posted them online for the public to see. Some school leaders say presenting the plans by July 1 satisfied their requirement. But, that has left questions regarding the details of much of the spending.

School districts across Dutchess are slated to split roughly \$58 million in funding, with the largest districts, and those with the highest need, receiving the most.

In Dutchess, Hyde Park and Wappingers were the only districts to have plans posted on their homepages as of midweek. Other districts, such as Arlington and Poughkeepsie, previously outlined plans in presentations during school board meetings; Arlington's presentation can be found online by searching through board documents.

Those that were made public shared similar broad priorities, in addition to some individual needs within buildings. For example, Hyde Park is planning to use a portion of the funds to upgrade its HVAC systems.

Arlington Superintendent David Moyer gave a

See SPENDING, Page 5A

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Diversity

Continued from Page 1A

In May, Muslims across the nation shared posts and took to the streets to give voice to what they see as Israel's mistreatment of Palestinians and siege of Islam's third-most holiest site, Masjid Al Aqsa.

In the city of Poughkeepsie and in Newburgh, about a hundred protesters showed up to the May 25 rally, which Muhammad's brother helped organize. Most of them were Palestinian or Arab.

The Muslim community in the Hudson Valley and across the nation touches on nearly every country on the globe. While the religion is rooted in the Middle East, many of its followers come from South Asia, Africa, Europe and the U.S.

There were about 3.45 million Muslims living in the United States in 2017, according to Pew Research, making up 1.1% of the total population. Worldwide, as of 2010, there were 1.6 billion Muslims.

Islam, practiced by Muslims, is one of the fastest-growing religions in this country. Pew estimates by 2050 the Muslim population is projected to reach 8.1 million.

Dutchess County has three main mosques and is reported to have about 7,000 Muslims, according to 2010 data provided by Association of Religion Data Archives. Mosques — sometimes called masjids — are places of worship where Muslims go to pray and gather.

The buildings, some with plush carpeting and decorated with ornate Arabic calligraphy, stand empty most of the week except for Fridays during the weekly service.

Mosques, such as Masjid Al Mutakabbir in Poughkeepsie, Masjid Al Noor in the Town of Wappinger, and Masjid Al Ikhlas in Newburgh, hold some of the most diverse congregations in the region. Their prayer halls are a mix of African Americans, Hispanics and immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, Africa, Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Faith unites these worshippers. But their widely varied cultural identities, races and languages divide them — and some say it holds them back.

Worshippers say the benefits of a diverse congregation are numerous, from sharing resources and stories to building empathy and a broad range of support.

But hosting so many different, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives, backgrounds and opinions can also be divisive and exhausting, when a house of worship is expected to be a refuge from the outside noise.

"In terms of the growth and development of Islam in America, we're going to have to address this division between the immigrant community, African Americans, Latin and Hispanic communities," said Imam Anwar Kearney, who leads Masjid Al Mutakabbir.

There is broad agreement that diversity is welcome and necessary in the places we live, work and socialize. But when it comes to religious spaces, the issue of diversity is more complex. Congregations such as churches and temples often lack diversity due to a host of factors, such as location and familiar ties.

Muslim places of worship, especially in the Hudson Valley, are a paradigm of diversity because many of the adherents are a mix of converts and immigrants. However, even then, those in the faith community say such diversity can still lead to division.

The result manifests itself in decreasing participation in mosque activity, especially from the younger generations, leaders say — and can create a feeling of being an "other," as Muhammad said, for Muslims of all backgrounds.

Showing up

Muhammad's family has always worked at the forefront of race relations within the Muslim community. Both her parents were the only Black teachers at the Al Noor Islamic weekend school, which at the time was attended mostly by families from Pakistan and India.

Muhammad, 28, remembers growing up feeling left out because she didn't speak Arabic or Urdu, "like I wasn't a real Muslim, because my blood didn't come from certain countries."

Her father, who also helped found Masjid Al Ikhlas in Newburgh, wrote a book on the fragmentation of the Muslim community. And her brother is an activist who organized marches after the May 25, 2020, killing of Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, and more recently for Palestine.

Ali Muhammad, her brother, called the Newburgh protest in May "a win" not because of its size — about 200 people showed up — but because of who showed up. The protest was attended by Muslims who spoke to the diversity of the community, even some for whom



From left, Ali Muhammad with his sister Najah stand together outside her home in Wappingers Falls on June 8.

PATRICK OEHLER/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL



Iman Dr. Saad Gewida gives his sermon during services at the Hudson Valley Islamic Community Center in Mohegan Lake on April 16. FRANK BECERRA

JR/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

English is not their first language.

"Hearing them speak, they have difficulty speaking English, and having the confidence to go up there and speak in front of a crowd that might not have been open to them," Ali Muhammad said.

But he also noted many of the faces he saw during these past weeks at protests were absent last year when he was organizing protests after Floyd's death.

Many of the mosques in the region struggle with diversity. While some worshippers say there has been a "perception" of racism, most shy away from using that term when it comes to their own mosque, instead calling it "culturalism," "colorism" or basic ignorance.

But whatever terminology is used to describe the division, it prevents many members from engaging with the mosque community outside of the prescribed prayers on Fridays or during Ramadan.

Fazad Ali is on Masjid Al Ikhlas' board and helps organize events. In the past, he tried calling individual members in order to get congregants to attend community potlucks meant to bring various groups together.

"I noticed that with church programs, if the Christians have an event, they don't have to work at it, they would have signs and everyone would show up," Ali said, who is on the masjid's board. "Muslims are different, because we have different cultures, and that's what's holding us back."

For the most part, many Muslims here view their mosque as a place to pray only, not to build bonds and share experiences. That's one of the reasons these buildings stay empty for most of the week.

For Najah Imani Muhammad, who moved back to the area recently, being part of the Muslim community is important, but not being part of the mosque.

"I feel community, not necessarily in a mosque or a masjid, but in people's homes and the people I connect with," she said, placing the emphasis on the relationships, and not the building.

The language barrier

It took going to college for Samirah Aziz to understand how behavior and language, no matter how benign, put up walls between worshippers at her mosque.

The 22-year-old commuted between her home in Newburgh and the Vassar College campus in Poughkeepsie for the past four years. While at school, she and her fellow Muslim students shared stories about their hometown mosques.

"Having a more diverse and openly communicative group there definitely has broadened my horizons in terms of the Muslim community," she said, adding that her experience has inspired a "reckoning in me" regarding what she saw as racial and cultural segregation within her congregation at home.

"Everyone just sticks to their own little groups even though we all prayed together," Aziz said. She remembers growing up she'd only been to the homes of other Bangladeshi families, acknowledging her own participation in self-segregation.

Mosques are already divided by gender. In the Newburgh mosque, the women pray upstairs and have their own entrance.

Aziz said during Friday service, or Jummah, before the pandemic she would sit with her mother and sister in the cluster of "Bangladeshi American Aunties" who would converse with each other in Bangla before the prayers started.

In the back rows, many of the African women would sit together. No one questioned this unspoken arrangement, and the two groups rarely engaged with each other.

"There are these subgroups and circles that people are just scared to venture outside of," Aziz said. "But what are we scared of? There isn't anything to actually fear. We're all in this together."

Language is one of the biggest barriers that keeps people from getting to know each other. Those who speak only English feel excluded from group activities where others speak freely in their native languages. Language doesn't allow for non-speakers to enter into conversations and creates a sense of exclusion.

In most mosques, during social gatherings, it's not uncommon to hear a mix of languages such as Arabic, English, Bangla and Urdu. For many, this is because speaking in one's native language is easier and comforting when around those who can share in the conversation.

Aziz plans to stay in Newburgh this summer and plans to take a more active role within the mosque community. She wants to work on ways to bring the various groups within her mosque together.

Bringing communities together

Nedra Thompson focuses on the skills people can bring to the table.

She worked with Vassar College's Muslim chaplain and Masjid Al Mutakabbir to secure funding for Chromebooks for a tutoring program.

The business owner also worked with community members from a neighboring mosque to provide groceries and clothing on a monthly basis to those in need in front of Poughkeepsie's mosque.

What Thompson, and others like her, are aiming for is a Muslim community that is actively engaged in its neighborhoods.

"There used to be a time when the churches and religious centers took care of the neighborhoods and kids," Thompson said.

They need buy-in from a community that is fragmented.

Masjid Al Mutakabbir was started by a group of African Americans in the 1980s out of a storefront that sold furniture on Main Street.

Over the years, the community grew and is now a mix of ethnicities and races.

About a 15-minute drive south, and around the same time, Masjid Al Noor

was built on a hilltop by affluent Pakistani and Arab immigrants. They saw the mosque as a means for keeping their community together and preserving their values.

"The different communities had different goals and different objectives," Kearney said. The African American community that started the mosque in the city was made up mostly of converts whose focus was on learning and teaching Islam, along with "African American unity" and helping the struggling working class.

Over the past couple of years, those interests have begun to intertwine. Congregants may attend Friday prayers at one mosque, but will sign their children up for the weekend religious school at the other mosque.

For the past couple of years, Thompson has been working with a group of women from the neighboring mosque to provide groceries and clothing once a month to individuals who are homeless.

The two communities have also worked together to provide those within the Muslim community with financial assistance.

Thompson hopes to one day see both communities working together on a youth-led day camp for the City of Poughkeepsie, which would require broad Muslim support.

The disconnect

On a Sunday morning, Najiba Jonigan's computer screen is full of young faces. She co-teaches 8- and 9-year-olds for the Al Noor Islamic weekend school. Before the pandemic, the class would be held in a downstairs classroom of Masjid Al Noor.

Jonigan is rooted in the school, having volunteered there for two decades. She watched the school grow with families from neighboring towns and counties dropping their children off at the one day religious school.

But there was a time when she felt apart from the community.

When Jonigan, who is Moroccan, first found the masjid, there were mostly South Asian families.

"I was new to the country and the community made me feel at home," she said. "We made many friends and started to learn about the Pakistan and Indian culture. We have close friends who used to teach my husband about Islam and we learned from each other."

As time passed, Jonigan started to notice a disconnect, that people she met at the masjid didn't welcome others the same way they welcomed those from their own countries. She would hear other Arabs say the masjid catered only to those from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

Jonigan didn't believe that rumor, since she worked with the weekend school, and was friends with the other teachers. But, she and her husband started to attend Masjid Ar Rashid in Beacon, which has a larger African American and Arab population. They also had programs for adults, which was helpful to her husband who had converted.

Today Jonigan's family goes between the two masjids. Members from both masjids helped her family during a critical time when her daughter was sick. Many community members from both would drive south to Westchester to visit her daughter in the hospital.

"When you belong to a community, they don't let you down," she said.

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Spending

Continued from Page 1A

presentation to the public at a school board meeting on June 8. Moyer said the district closely followed guidelines for grant money required by the state. He maintained that the district fulfilled its requirement through communication with the community and the board.

“My understanding was that we met the requirement for the notifications about public information,” Moyer said. “The requirements for public notifications were relatively open-ended and different districts were doing it in different ways.”

He noted that the district will continue to update the board regularly throughout the year as it moves forward with plans for the federal grants.

It does not appear anyone is enforcing the July 1 deadline. The state Education Department notified districts in a May 17 memo that it would not provide a template for the plans or collect them.

“To be clear, this requirement is not NYSED’s,” said a statement from the Education Department.

Community involvement required

The state budget also required districts to consult with their communities before finalizing plans for spending American Rescue Plan grants and large increases in state education aid. This mandate was seen as a tall order a time when most districts were returning students to school full time and preparing for end-of-the-year activities.

Many districts did not even begin collecting community feedback until June, mostly through digital surveys or at meetings.

State Sen. Shelley Mayer, D-Yonkers, chair of the Senate education committee, said legislators put the requirements in the budget so that districts would consult with parents and make their spending decisions transparently. But the tight July 1 deadline was a lot to ask, she said.

“The intent of requiring the plans — from my perspective as someone who fought for this — was for parents to have access to district conversations and to the plans,” Mayer said. “We put it in



Hyde Park Central School District Superintendent Aviva Kafka checks in on a science class at Haviland Middle School on March 15.

PATRICK OEHLER/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

there knowing schools had a lot on their plates and that collecting stakeholder input on how to use the money is not an easy process.”

Mayer said she expected all districts to post their plans.

“It will take some time to even out, but I’m confident the districts will get there,” she said.

Where is the money going?

Some districts, such as Arlington, were specific with how much money would be spent in each component of their plan, while others listed of programs, projects and resources the money will be used for without price tags.

In his presentation to the board, Moyer outlined six areas in which Arlington’s \$7.5 million would be allocated: professional learning, resources, staff, accelerating learning, technology and facilities. Of the six areas, \$6.2 million was allocated to accelerated learning and \$3.1 million went to technology.

“We were looking at it from a short-term, long-term type of situation. We are looking to address some of the immediate needs, but we also wanted to be strategic about using some of the money that will leverage long-term overall improvement in our ability to meet the needs of our students,” Moyer said.

“Eventually, the grant money goes away and we want to make sure that we have a lasting impact in whatever we spend our dollars on.”

The plans for Arlington include the hiring of six elementary special education teachers, one social worker, a grant administrator and substitute teachers. Additionally, Moyer proposed investing into Pre-K, summer academies, school day interventions, extended programs and equal opportunity schools.

Hyde Park Superintendent Aviva Kafka presented her plans to the school board on June 14. She noted the plans for the money were developed through communication with the parents, students and community stakeholders. The three areas of focus included health and safety, learning opportunities, and mental health support.

She noted districts “need to be careful” about creating annual expenses when the funding will run dry after four years.

“We can’t have positions that need to be cut from things that we really need,” Kafka said. “So we have to be careful to plan out some one time things that have to be done and some things that have to be done for the pandemic and for the students that have been out of school.”

The Hyde Park plan proposed a reduction of class sizes in the second

Who received what?

Dutchess districts are slated to receive \$58.19 million under the American Rescue Plan, with Poughkeepsie, Wappingers and Arlington receiving the most.

The full list includes:

- **Arlington:** \$7,470,301
- **Beacon:** \$4,220,069
- **Dover:** \$3,820,768
- **Hyde Park:** \$5,841,171
- **Millbrook:** \$847,849
- **Pawling:** \$903,637
- **Pine Plains:** \$1,086,513
- **Poughkeepsie:** \$19,485,982
- **Red Hook:** \$1,662,698
- **Rhinebeck:** \$1,544,753
- **Spackenkill:** \$1,538,810
- **Wappingers:** \$8,608,871
- **Webutuck:** \$1,154,016

grade, an extended day program, programming for mental health support at each building, and expansion of summer program for elementary and middle school students.

In Poughkeepsie, the district plans to create an academic recovery program that will serve students K-12. The focus is on academic and social emotional supports for students.

A survey was sent out to parents by the district for community and parent input on how the money should be spent, and what the program should look like.

The plans in Wappingers outline programs similar to that of others in the region. Superintendent Dwight Bonk said the district worked with the community to come up with solutions programs that would benefit the district, such as training for staff on how to provide social and emotional support for students, and various academic programming for students at all age levels.

Staff writer Gary Stern contributed to this report. Katelyn Cordero is the education reporter for the Poughkeepsie Journal: kcordero@poughkeepsiejournal.com; Twitter: @KatelynCordero.

Continued from previous page

ground up. Metal lockers still line the dark hallways and the U.S. flag still flies outside at full mast.

Mosques and Islamic centers are some of the most diverse religious spaces in the Hudson Valley. Some were started by African Americans, as an alternative to the Black-centric Nation of Islam, while others were started by immigrants as a way to preserve the traditions of the countries they left. Most have diversified over the years, as more immigrants move into the Hudson Valley.

But for converts, who are often white or Black, it can sometimes be challenging to find your place in the sea of different nationalities, cultures and languages.

Akhtab said that wasn’t the case with him. He enjoys meeting new people and is comfortable being among such diversity. And when someone new visits the center, he is one of the first to give him a hug or invite the family home for dinner.

That’s how he met Farooq Qaiser, one of his closest friends who is from Pakistan.

“It was very difficult for me to adjust here, if he was not here,” said Qaiser, who works as a bus driver in New York City. There were not many Pakistani families at the mosque, and he wasn’t used to being around so many different cultures.

Qaiser said it was only after meeting Akhtab that he felt connected to the HVICC community. He still remembers that first hug.

The two can be found together in the prayer hall, which once was a library, during the midday prayers now. And when talking to them, they compete in sharing the good works of the other. Qaiser once let individuals who were homeless stay at his house when he was away traveling, Akhtab recalled.

Qaiser, who has young children, is concerned that youth are not as interested in attending the center as their parents. Without proper programming to make Islam, and the center, relevant to their lives, the community will end up losing the younger generation, he believes.

And during community dinner, a time when people have a chance to mingle and get to know one and other, the center’s cafeteria is divided by tables of congregants who still choose to sit with those who look like them and speak the same language.

“Unfortunately when we have (community) dinners together, it looks like the prison cafeteria, because people do cling,” Akhtab said. “They speak the same language, they have the culture ties, they want to use that language.”

Akhtab understands that members enjoy being able to get together and speak in their own languages. He also knows that when the time comes for the community to come together to support a cause, they come together like “a cement wall.” But his own comfort comes from sitting with different groups, his Yemeni brothers one night, and Pakistanis another night.

“By being in this kind of environment, I’ve opened my mind and my soul to cultures I would not normally be exposed to,” Akhtab said.

Building a church from scratch

Pastor Anthony Mugnano started his quest for di-

versity by extending an open invitation to worship at a new church in the Rock Tavern community of the Town of New Windsor, a mostly white suburb of Newburgh.

An Italian, white man adopted at a young age by a devout Puerto Rican couple and whose wife is Mexican, Mugnano has led the multi-cultural, multi-generational Encounter Church on Station Road since November 2014.

The former congregation dissolved, allowing Mugnano to purchase the building and start a new church from scratch.

While building the church, he focused on the free range of worship to attract a diverse membership instead of dwelling on demographics. Lifting formalities and rigid rules that are present in other churches, in itself, has attracted people of all backgrounds, Mugnano surmised. He has also seen people from far away communities tuning into services online during the pandemic.

“Everybody has their own interaction with God,” he said.

It’s about true worship, and the process of exposing people’s inner-most being when they express adoration toward God and, more simply, letting them be themselves, Mugnano said.

“Church is not a country club,” Mugnano said. “It’s hard because people will always gravitate toward where they feel comfortable and where they feel best, but one of the things I’ve always said about our church is that we’re a place where you don’t have to fit in to belong.”

In his opinion, a person is not supposed to fit in with their congregation. “We’re all individually created in the eyes of our Creator,” Mugnano said.

If everyone were created the same, people would be robotic, useless, without individual talents to contribute to society.

He hates the cliched phrase uttered by many religious people: “God doesn’t see color.”

“I say, ‘Well, wait a minute, if God doesn’t see color, then why did he create it? Why?’” Mugnano said. “That’s the most racist thing any pastor could say is that God doesn’t see color. ... When we get to heaven, it’s going to be a colorful place.”

Mugnano pointed out that a person may assume his church is all-white because of the neighborhood it is in. A person may think, “What does that church have to offer?” Mugnano said.

At a Sunday service at Encounter Church on Jan. 24, Mugnano’s format allowed people to freely come and go during the service; dance, sing, and walk around, even blow traditional horns while worshipping. Attendance throughout the service fluctuated between 40 and 70 people ranging from children to older adults.

“You see everybody together, I love that because that’s how Heaven is going to be because it’s not going to be just one race,” said Giselle Bonilla, Mugnano’s adopted mother who was visiting that day with his adopted sister Sherisse Irizarry. “I love that.”

Irizarry noted that segregation may be necessary for some people.

“It creates a safety net,” she said. “I think one of the reasons why you have people who kind of conjure up with their own nationality is because they feel safe. So,

they fear the unknown and they don’t want to be hurt.”

Part of it is intentional and part of it is unintentional, Irizarry said.

“Then it gets judged by others and called ‘segregation,’ but is it really segregation? Why? Where’s the question of why they do that?” she asked.

It’s more like preservation.

“They’re protecting themselves,” Irizarry said.

Mugnano’s adopted father, Bonilla’s husband, had died three months prior to their visit. During the conversation with Irizarry and a reporter about self-segregation, she was reminded of him.

“My husband always used to say that if you want to create something different, you have to be intentional about it,” Bonilla said. “Because if you’re not intentional, you won’t change anything.”

Bridging the divide is the goal

For diversity to take hold and grow roots, congregants of any diverse institution need to cross of the cultural boundaries, create a network of support that lifts up the weakest among them.

“Usually when you are talking about diversity, you’re talking about a community where friendships are formed, you’re supporting one and other, you’re helping each other find jobs, you’re helping each other grow in faith ... and those are the ones, I’d say, are fairly rare,” Emerson said.

And in most cases, that only happens when leadership makes creating and maintaining a diverse congregation the priority. How this is done is through messaging from the pulpit, but also creating a religious brand or identity that dominates cultural identity, which tends to be very strong.

Salahuddin M. Muhammad is a Muslim chaplain and graduate of the Hartford Seminary. In his book, “Bridging the Divide Between Immigrant and African-American Muslims by Utilizing the Concept of Ta’weed as the Catalyst,” he addresses how the Islamic community has suffered from fragmentation.

“I must admit that it would probably be much easier to work with one culture or ethnic group, but this is not my reality; and I do not think the Creator would want it to be this way,” wrote Muhammad.

Muhammad was one of the founders of Masjid Al Iklhas in Newburgh. The community first started as a group of Black families who would meet at each others homes and hold prayer in the NAACP building in Newburgh.

As the community started to absorb the growing number of immigrants, he grew aware of the tension between the two groups. He saw that people identified with their culture and nationality, more so than their Muslim identity.

Some congregants call that division “culturalism” while others will go as far as to say it is tinged with “racism.”

In order to counteract the tensions, the leaders of the mosque emphasize the traditional teachings of the religious and not the cultural variations that exist within different ethnicities.

“We kind of exist separate from one and other,” Emerson said. “That’s the way diversity mostly works, and people like that kind of diversity because it doesn’t cost them anything. It’s like a point of pride.”



Trump to give West Point commencement address

MID-HUDSON, 3A

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‘HANGING ON BY A THREAD’



Queen City Tattoo on Maple Street in the City of Poughkeepsie closed amid restrictions to combat the coronavirus. Owner Mike Boyce is eager to reopen as soon as possible. PATRICK OEHLER/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

Dutchess County officials fear regional approach to restarting businesses could be ‘detrimental’

Ryan Santistevan, Joseph Spector and Katelyn Cordero
Poughkeepsie Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Mike Boyce owns Queen City Tattoo in the City of Poughkeepsie with his wife, Jade.

The couple last November invested their savings in moving their shop from Main Street to a spot on Maple Street, in the hopes of making their customers feel more comfortable.

Four months later, though, they were forced to close amid restrictions on businesses to help combat the spread of coronavirus.

The post-tax season in April, Boyce said, is typically a time when his business thrives. Instead, he’s scared.

“I’m worried that a lot of places aren’t going to reopen,” he said. “You have a lot of people saying, ‘Don’t reopen. This isn’t safe. You have to save lives.’ But the smartest thing I’ve seen someone say, which was on Facebook, was, ‘Small businesses are on ventilators now. We need help too.’”

Gov. Andrew Cuomo in recent days has talked about

a regional approach to reopening businesses in New York as a way to slowly bring back the state’s economy. Dutchess County, though, may find itself waiting for help longer than most.

Any plan would likely start with parts of upstate New York that have had the fewest coronavirus cases and deaths. More than 90% of the state’s deaths, hospitalizations and cases have been in New York City and its suburbs.

“We operate as one state, but we also have to understand variations,” Cuomo said Tuesday in Buffalo. “You do want to get this economy open as soon as possible. And if a situation is radically different in one part of the state than another part of the state, take that into consideration.”

However, Cuomo’s plans remain rough, with no timeline or specifics shared, and it leaves unanswered questions regarding Dutchess.

Cuomo indicated the state’s existing boundaries for its 10 Regional Economic Councils would serve as rough guidance for how different regions of the state

See BUSINESS, Page 2A

Ramadan during pandemic brings families together

Saba Ali Poughkeepsie Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Noreen Asif built a mosque in her 6-year-old daughter’s bedroom.

The end of this week marks the start of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. It’s a month when Muslims crowd into mosques for late-night prayers, and into each other’s homes to break daylong fasts.

But this year the mosques will remain empty. So Asif and her children used prayer rugs, lights and a cardboard cutout to create a place of worship in their home.

“This year we are staying home, Asif said. “I wanted to do something extra so my kids, they can enjoy and my family won’t be missing anything.”

Usually during Ramadan, the Marlboro family would drive across the river to attend the community dinners and nightly prayers held at Masjid Al Noor in the Town of Wappinger.

Instead, she is planning ways her family can still enjoy the traditions of the month during which Muslims do not eat or drink from before sunrise until sunset.

Members of the community say the changes this year brought on by state restrictions will be both a hurdle and a blessing. Without the ability to gather and offer support, prayer sessions that sometimes stretch for hours may feel more arduous. But some say being isolated inside a home can help the family

See RAMADAN, Page 5A



Syed Ayyan, Syed Ammar and Abiha Asif in the “masjid” their mother, Noreen Asif, created for them at their Marlboro home to help celebrate Ramadan. COURTESY PHOTO

Cuomo unsure of closing schools for year

Jon Campbell New York State Team
USA TODAY NETWORK

ALBANY – New York is still not ready to close schools for the rest of the academic year, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Wednesday.

At his daily coronavirus briefing, Cuomo said reopening school buildings throughout the state before the end of the academic year in June would be a “very, very big undertaking.”

But Cuomo said calling off the rest of the school year would be a tacit admission that nonessential businesses would also remain closed through June, which the Democratic governor said he’s unwilling to do at this point.

“When you say you’re not going to open schools, you may as well say you’re not going to open businesses because the two are connected,” Cuomo said. “I don’t know how you open businesses without opening school. You want me to go to work? Hallelujah. What do I do with my kids?”

Cuomo continued: “To say we’re not going to open businesses until June, I’m not there yet. I don’t think anybody is there yet.”

As of Wednesday, New York had 15,302 confirmed COVID-19 deaths and more than 250,000 confirmed cases, far more than any other state in the country.

Last week, Cuomo announced schools would remain closed through at least May 15 as the novel coronavirus continues its spread through the state.

But neighboring Massachusetts and Pennsylvania have closed their school buildings for the rest of the academic year.

Cuomo has repeatedly said it’s important for neighboring states to collaborate on their approach, launching a multi-state reopening task force earlier this week that includes at least seven states.

The governor’s reluctance to close New York schools has caused frustration for school officials and some local governments, including New York City

See SCHOOLS, Page 5A

USA TODAY
With their economies closed, swing state leaders face balancing act. 8A

Weather
High 48° ■ Low 40°
Partly cloudy.
Forecast, 5A

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5-DAY FORECAST FOR MID-HUDSON VALLEY

Today	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
Mostly cloudy	Rain	Mostly cloudy	Cloudy with rain tapering off	Mostly cloudy and cool
48° 40°	49° 35°	62° 47°	40° 51°	39° 53°

FORECAST TODAY

Temperature high/low 48°/40°
RealFeel Temp high/low 51°/35°
Chance of precipitation 25%
Relative humidity (4 p.m.) 46%
Heat index (4 p.m.) 47°
Wind (4 p.m.) SSW at 5 mph
Barometric pressure (4 p.m.) 29.99"
Visibility (4 p.m.) 10 miles
The patented AccuWeather.com RealFeel Temperature® is an exclusive index of effective temperature based on eight weather factors.

ENVIRONMENT

Air Quality Today: 41
Air Quality yesterday: 43 (Good)
0-50, Good; 51-100, Moderate; 101-150, Unhealthy for sensitive groups; 151-200, Unhealthy; 201-300, Very unhealthy; 301-500, Hazardous
Source: NY Dept. of Environ. Conservation

Rain Acidity (pH of last rainfall): NA
pH of previous rainfall April 18: N.A.

The pH is a measure of acidity or alkalinity. On a scale of 0 to 14, vinegar has a pH of 3; neutral is 7. Normal rain is a bit acidic at 5.
Source: Cary Inst. of Ecosystem Studies http://www.caryinstitute.org/emp.html

ALMANAC

TODAY

Sun and Moon rise set
Sun 6:03 a.m. 7:45 p.m.
Moon 6:38 a.m. 8:24 p.m.
Tides first second
High 1:39 a.m. 2:02 p.m.
Low 8:20 a.m. 8:21 p.m.
Temperature records
High: 85° (2007) Low: 21° (1989)

WEDNESDAY

(Dutchess Airport through 5 p.m.)
Temperatures High/Low 49°/32°
Precipitation (in inches) 0.00"
24 hours through 5 p.m. Wed. 0.00"
Month to date 1.99"
Year to date 7.95"

REGIONAL, STATE & NATIONAL FORECAST

City	Today	Fri.
Albany	53/38/pc	50/35/r
Beacon	48/39/c	47/34/r
Binghamton	42/38/i	48/33/r
Buffalo	43/37/sh	50/35/c
Carmel	46/38/c	46/34/r
Catskill	48/39/pc	48/35/r
Ithaca	40/37/i	47/32/r
Kingston	47/39/c	48/33/r
Middletown	49/38/c	47/33/r
Millerton	45/38/pc	46/33/r
New Paltz	48/39/c	48/33/r
New York City	51/45/r	51/42/r
Newburgh	48/39/c	47/33/r
Pawling	47/39/c	47/34/r
Poughkeepsie	48/40/c	49/35/r
Rhinebeck	47/39/c	47/34/r
Rochester	43/36/c	48/33/r
Stewart Airport	47/40/c	48/34/r
Syracuse	46/38/pc	51/34/r
Utica	46/36/pc	50/32/r
White Plains	48/41/c	48/38/r
Woodstock	46/38/c	47/34/r

Weather (W): s-sunny, pc-partly cloudy, c-cloudy, sh-showers, t-thunderstorms, r-rain, sf-snow flurries, sn-snow, f-ice

Schools

Continued from Page 1A

Mayor Bill de Blasio, who announced earlier this month that his city's schools would remain closed before being overruled by Cuomo.

This week, Cuomo has repeatedly acknowledged the difficulties in reopening schools in the middle of a pandemic.

On Wednesday, he listed some of those challenges.

Schools, for example, would have to be heavily sanitized before students return, he said. And school districts would also have to put together programs and measures to ensure some level of social distancing, a challenge to pull together in a matter of weeks when many school buildings are crowded as they are.

Cuomo acknowledged it's plausible that schools in some parts of the state could reopen sooner than others, though he didn't commit to doing so.

Of the state's total COVID-19 cases, the vast majority have been in New York City and its suburbs, leaving open the possibility that the state could reopen schools in regions that have had far fewer cases.

"Theoretically, could you? Yes," Cuomo said. "Could you say North Country schools will open with all those provisos? Yes."

Still, any decisions would be based on data and expert opinion as the state continues to strain to contain the virus.

"Let's get the data," he said. "In the meantime,

schools will not open until we say schools will open statewide."

Schools, meanwhile, are fearful of potential cuts as the coronavirus outbreak continues to harm the state's finances.

Cuomo on Tuesday warned the state may cut state school funding by 20% if the federal government doesn't come through with direct aid for state governments.

That drew a rebuke from the New York State United Teachers union, which said this is a time to invest in public education, not cut.

"Cuts will devastate schools and colleges that already had growing lists of needs before the floor dropped out from the economy," NYSUT President Andy Pallotta said in a statement.

"Direct federal aid for these institutions is a critical step that can help, but so too is the state seeking new revenues through taxes on the ultrawealthy to help fund essential public services like education."

Outside Cuomo's briefing Wednesday, about 100 protesters urged state government to reopen businesses, holding signs that read, "Fear is the Virus" and "Fear the Govt Not COVID 19."

Cuomo knocked their message, saying he too wants to restart the economy, but it can't be done at the expense of human lives.

"The illness is death. What's worse than death?" he said.

Jon Campbell is a New York state government reporter for the USA TODAY Network. He can be reached at JCAMPBELL@Gannett.com or on Twitter at @JonCampbellGAN.



Imam Anwar Kearney of Masjid Al Mutakabbir poses in the City of Poughkeepsie.

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Ramadan

Continued from Page 1A

unit grow closer during a month in which introspection is stressed.

Mosques, meanwhile, are planning virtual activities and events to bring the community together, and individuals are using the needs created by the crisis as a way to focus on zakat, or charity, a pillar of their faith.

All houses of worship closed their doors in March after the state banned large gatherings to help slow the spread of the coronavirus. Churches were empty on Easter Weekend and families celebrated socially distant from each other during Passover.

"I have people texting me, 'What are we going to do for Ramadan?'" said Imam Anwar Kearney, who leads the congregation at Masjid Al Mutakabbir in the City of Poughkeepsie.

The mosque is one of three in Dutchess County, and the first to open, according to Kearney. The other two are in the Town of Wappinger and Beacon, respectively.

"So, you know, when you're asked a question like, 'What are we going to do?' I have to remind them that we are going to follow the rules as delineated by the health care professionals and the leaders of our society," Kearney said.

Looking to the sky to begin month

Ramadan, a significant month based on the lunar calendar, is when Muslims believe God revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad.

Traditionally mosques will determine the start of Ramadan by sighting the crescent moon or looking to Saudi Arabia, where Islam originated, for the decision. However, many mosques now decide on a date ahead of time, calculated using scientific methods.

Masjid Al Noor has already announced that it will start fasting on Friday. Masjid Al Mutakabbir will wait for a "verified sighting of the moon throughout the world."

Masjid Al Noor sent out a notice last week reminding its members that the mosque will remain closed, but that it was planning virtual events. Some mosques are planning webinars, book clubs, ritual and non-ritual prayers, and the recitation of the Quran.

Many also plan to break fast online with friends. Some are seeing both the positives and negatives of

isolating during the month.

"This is the first year that the whole family is together. We just want to get to know each other better," said Sahar Elsamra, noting that during recent Ramadans she hasn't been able to spend a lot of time with her children and husband due to work or school. Elsamra would also spend time organizing dinners at Masjid Al Noor.

"We are hoping that Ramadan will make us feel better," she said, "but we worry about our families. I'm worried about my kids. My son and son-in-law both work outside, so we are worried every day."

Charitable efforts

Families are focusing on worship and charity rather than that fear.

Elsamra, who is a youth adviser at Masjid Al Noor, organized a fundraiser and is working with the teenagers to meet the needs of the general community with food and financial assistance.

Abdul-Karim Nasr and his wife Veronica Galimore are planning to pass out boxes of dates to Muslim store owners in the City of Poughkeepsie to help them open up their fasts. Many of these store owners are now struggling to stay open due to the pandemic.

"I was just trying to do that as part of our zakat. We usually go to the masjid and put money in the zakat box," Galimore said.

Asif has a donation box set up in the house so that her family can donate through the month, with all proceeds to be given to charitable causes at the end.

But the isolation during this month will also bring with it a sense of self-awareness, some said, and a realization of how faith can be augmented by community.

The month not only calls for fasting during the day, but also standing in prayers at night, a tradition that can last for upwards of two hours.

"Ramadan is a time for introspection ... Usually when we have these group iftars and Taraweeh prayers (late-night prayers) at the masjid, our energies together encourage each other that we are all going to worship Allah together," he said.

"So now the test is real," Kearney said. "Last Ramadan I was at the masjid every night. Now the question is this Ramadan will I get up, will I turn the TV off, will I encourage my family to make the Taraweeh prayer at home."

Saba Ali: SAlil@poughkeepsiejournal.com; 845-451-4518.

Shown are noon positions of weather systems and precipitation. Temperature bands are highs for the day.

City	Today	Fri.
Albuquerque	75/49/pc	74/46/pc
Anchorage	46/37/c	48/35/pc
Atlanta	70/57/r	76/56/pc
Atlantic City	59/51/r	60/44/r
Baltimore	63/52/r	63/47/sh
Boston	54/41/pc	44/38/r
Buffalo	43/37/sh	50/35/c
Burlington, VT	50/29/s	51/32/pc
Charleston, SC	77/65/t	83/59/pc
Charlottesville	70/57/t	74/54/pc
Charlotte	67/60/t	78/54/pc
Chicago	58/42/sh	53/41/sh
Cincinnati	59/50/r	66/49/c
Cleveland	58/42/sh	50/39/pc
Dallas	84/64/pc	84/56/s
Denver	66/36/t	55/37/pc
Des Moines	72/48/c	62/43/r
Detroit	48/38/sh	56/38/pc
Ft. Lauderdale	88/80/pc	91/79/pc
Grand Rapids	47/36/sh	54/38/c
Helena	56/39/sh	61/37/pc
Honolulu	84/72/pc	83/71/pc
Houston	87/63/s	90/64/s
Indianapolis	57/47/r	65/49/c
Jackson, MS	80/54/t	82/59/s
Jacksonville	88/69/t	82/66/t
Kansas City	73/52/c	65/46/r
Las Vegas	90/67/s	87/65/t
Little Rock	74/53/c	76/55/t
Los Angeles	93/66/s	95/67/s
Louisville	64/54/r	70/54/c
Memphis	70/53/sh	76/57/pc
Miami	89/80/pc	94/80/s
Minneapolis	45/39/sh	46/39/c
Minneapolis	62/40/pc	53/39/sh
Nashville	70/54/t	73/55/pc
New Orleans	84/65/t	85/67/s
Norfolk	68/61/r	78/53/c
Omaha	77/51/pc	66/42/r
Orlando	93/74/pc	85/71/t
Philadelphia	61/50/r	57/46/r
Phoenix	97/70/s	98/70/s
Pittsburgh	59/48/r	59/41/sh
Portland, OR	64/48/pc	67/52/c
Providence	51/40/pc	48/37/r
Raleigh	67/62/t	79/52/pc
reno	74/46/pc	76/49/sh
Richmond	63/56/r	76/49/sh
St. Louis	64/52/r	70/53/t
Salt Lake City	61/44/sh	63/46/pc
San Diego	77/63/s	82/64/pc
San Francisco	69/55/s	72/55/s
Savannah	79/66/t	84/61/s
Seattle	61/48/sh	64/51/pc
Syracuse	46/38/pc	51/34/r
Tampa	89/78/pc	83/74/r
Trenton	57/46/r	51/41/r
Washington, DC	63/54/r	69/49/c
W. Palm Beach	88/79/pc	92/75/t
Wilmington, DE	60/50/r	58/45/r