

On a cloudless afternoon in June, Hamdy | body knows everybody." Abbass steps gingerly along the remnants of a country road, making his way through an ument to his community's perseverance: a the "barn mosque." 10,000-plus-square-foot community cen-

ter and a 7,000-square-foot domed mosque.

This golden field of rolling hills is located in San Martin (pronounced *Mar-teen*), an unincorporated community of 7,000 people nestled between Morgan Hill and Gilroy, two fast-growing cities at the southern edge of Santa Clara County. Abbass came to America in 1979 after graduating from college in Egypt. He and his wife raised their two daughters about 20 miles south, in Hollister, where they moved in 1987 after stints in Berkeley, Salinas, and San Diego. They chose Hollister, he says, because it welcomed them; it was a place where "every-

The 25-minute commute to Gilroy, where Abbass works as a financial planner, allows empty field. He pauses to take in the view. him to make it home in time for family To the north are several small hills crowned dinner. The only problem comes on Friby oak trees. Nearby, a faded sign affixed to a day afternoons, when it's time to pray. For post announces a five-mile-per-hour speed | years, Abbass drove to the closest mosque, limit. Abbass, a balding 63-year-old dressed in Santa Clara; the return trip, spent crawlin pleated khakis and a white button-down ing along with commuters getting a jump shirt, shields his eyes and squints into what on the weekend, could take two and a half he hopes will be the future. "The ceme- hours. Tiring of the inconvenience, in 1999 tery will be over that way," he says, point- Abbass helped organize a group of around 10 ing west toward a gentle slope. Beneath his families who formed a congregation called feet lies the promise of a basketball court, the South Valley Islamic Center and rented to be joined by a volleyball court and a an office in Morgan Hill for Friday prayers. playground. And on the flat part of the land, Several years later, a member offered up his connected by a plaza with a fountain in the backyard barn in San Martin. They evicted middle, will someday rise a gleaming mon- the sheep, laid down carpet, and called it

But Abbass and his fellow SVIC members | Martin will be that place.



knew their young community would soon outgrow the barn mosque. They dreamed of a proper building, and after several years of searching for sites throughout the South Valley, they discovered this hillside, which had long stood undeveloped and was being sold privately. It seemed like the perfect location. In 2006, they bought the 16-acre property for \$2 million. Perhaps naïvely, Abbass thought the development would be accepted without much fuss. He was wrong.

No sooner had the SVIC filed its plans with the county than its members were met by a wave of opposition, one that grew in vehemence and threatened violence as America's political scene shifted under their feet. Over the next 10-plus years, they would face down a fusillade of challenges from the surrounding community, ranging from environmental lawsuits to campaigns of disinformation to outright anti-Muslim bigotry. The resistance came from many parties, not all of them motivated by hate—at least not outwardly. As well as being one of the most conservative pockets of Silicon Valley, San Martin is proudly rural, home to family-owned farms that grow everything from mushrooms to wine grapes. Many town residents saw the project, which would be more than four times the size of the next-largest community space in town, as the latest example of the type of sprawl they had come here to escape. Locals fretted that it would lead to everything from traffic jams to groundwater contamination, a hot button in a community where most residents draw their water from wells.

Through all the raucous debates over real estate and religion that have ensued, this hillside has remained quiet, a blank canvas upon which people can project their dreams and nightmares. "It will be beautiful," Abbass says of the mosque as he walks over the scrubby, sunbaked ground. His group decided to call the project the Cordoba Center, after the city in Spain where, for a time during the Middle Ages, Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexisted in relative peace. He laughs ruefully. That was a long time ago.



San Martin is special. That is the one point of agreement you'll hear from all sides of the ongoing dispute over Hamdy Abbass's mosque. Before companies like Apple and Hewlett-Packard helped transform the South Bay into Silicon Valley, the region's nickname was the Valley of Heart's Delight, due to its gentle climate, golden hills, and abundant fruit orchards. Now, of course,





it's mostly a valley of sprawl. But not in tiny | they have to keep similar types of develwhat much of the Valley looked like before tech came and conquered.

town—past a welding shop, a small corner tle of water and a map; her T-shirt reads "I ♥ San Martin." "You ready for the tour?" she asks, smiling.

Ludewig tells me, pointing north.

We climb into Ludewig's Lexus, joined by and vineyards and working farms. There are cows and horses, goats and sheep, chickcoyotes, even an occasional fox.

We head north a few minutes and enter Morgan Hill. The farms and livestock disap-

San Martin. To visit the community is to see opment from invading San Martin. "The headline is, not much," Reidel answers. The community does have a special zoning des-On a recent spring morning, I drive | ignation—rural residential—that sets limits through what passes for San Martin's down- on housing density, and the county created a dedicated body, the San Martin Planning market, and a café that seems untouched | Advisory Committee, to offer feedback to since the 1950s—and make a left into the the planning department. But Reidel says driveway of a yellow ranch-style house with the committee's advice is often ignored by a large oak tree out front. Connie Ludewig | the county planners, so his group is forced waits for me outside, holding a chilled bot- "to do our best to fight a rearguard action to preserve what we can."

After the tour, we gather around a table in Ludewig's backyard, beneath a tree filled Ludewig is a member of a group called the with chirping mocking birds. The topic turns San Martin Neighborhood Alliance (SMNA), to the Cordoba Center, and Reidel does most which seeks, as much as possible, to keep the of the talking. The 66-year-old entreprecommunity small and rural. She's from San neur and venture capitalist moved to San Jose and moved to San Martin to live with | Martin from Palo Alto six years ago because her future husband, Steve, whose father was his wife, who spent most of her life in rural born in the yellow house, which happens | Pennsylvania, missed the country. Speak- | 🖵 🤿 to sit across the street from the proposed | ing in measured tones, Reidel repeatedly Cordoba Center site. "Steve can remem- emphasizes that it gives him no pleasure to ber when that field was a prune orchard," | object to the Muslim group's proposal. "The bottom line is, I'm queasy about opposing a project that a religious community feels Art Reidel, the group's vice president, and | they need to accommodate their commu-Victor Loesche, a board member. Soon we're nity," he says. "I get it. They've outgrown driving along narrow country roads, past | their barn. God bless, literally. But you have modest homes tucked between orchards | to strike a reasonable balance. From our perspective, it's just nuts."

The SMNA's informal slogan is "Size Matens and llamas. In the back seat, Reidel and | ters...in San Martin," which it has printed Loesche swap stories about wild animals up on T-shirts for sale at the local market. they've spotted on their properties: bobcats, The four structures of the Cordoba Center would exceed 22,000 square feet. Currently, the largest community space in San Martin is the Lions Club, which was built pear, replaced by a Starbucks, a Little Cae- in 1982. The drab cinder-block building is sars, and a 24 Hour Fitness. Connie turns | 3,200 square feet. Most of the other places right, into a 131-unit luxury condo complex of worship in San Martin—which include that's under construction. I ask what tools | a number of churches, a synagogue, and

a Buddhist meditation center—are somewhere between 1,500 and 3,000 square feet.

It's not only locals who are alarmed. "It's a pretty huge project," says Alice Kaufman, the legislative advocacy director for the Committee for Green Foothills, which monitors open space in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties. "We have serious concerns about its size and scale, and feel it could be precedent setting in terms of similar projects in rural areas." If the county gives the green light to the Cordoba Center, she asks, what's to stop future applicants from saying that they want to build a 20,000-squarefoot project in San Martin?

"The big picture here is the character of the area," Reidel says. "It's the last remaining vestige of what we had in the Santa Clara Valley, and we see a lot of value in it. So when large projects come into that context—whether an RV park or a proposed religious institution—that are just way out of scale with anything we've got down here, it's an issue for us."

The irony is, the mosque wasn't always going to be so large. The original proposal for the South Valley Islamic Center, submitted in 2011, was for a 5,000-square-foot mosque alongside a 5,000-square-foot community center. The county determined that the project didn't require an environmental impact report, and the planning commission gave the thumbs-up to build in August 2012. But the approval came with a number of restrictions: The commission nearly halved the size of the community center, limited daily attendance to 80 visitors, and

ember's backyard in Sar Martin. Right: Cramped

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denied overnight accommodations, which for San Martin. "All you had been requested to allow for around-the- have to do is look across clock security.

Abbass's group appealed these restric- ring to the area east of tions. Appeals were also filed by two | the proposed mosque. groups that opposed the mosque, includ- "This is an industrial ing Ludewig's SMNA. These appeals moved zone." Indeed, the land is the issue to the Board of Supervisors, which located within a narrow voted unanimously in favor of approving the strip of San Martin that project and overruled each appeal. But then allows for industrial use, a group unrelated to the SMNA, the People's which stands in contrast Coalition for Government Accountability, to the bucolic setting operating out of a PO box in Gilroy, sued elsewhere. To the east of the county, alleging that it had failed to fol- the proposed site, across low the California Environmental Quality | a set of railroad tracks, is Act (CEQA). A year later, frustrated by the a 150,000-square-foot slow progress in court, Abbass and his fel- food-processing plant, low SVIC members voluntarily relinquished which is next to a large their permit. (It appears that the PCGA is auto salvage lot. He also now defunct; efforts to reach its previous | dismisses the frequent attorney were unsuccessful.)

proposal for a center almost two and a half "We're on a four-lane times bigger than the original. Sal Akhter, highway that used to be the project manager for the Cordoba Center, 101," he says, referring says the PCGA lawsuit is partially to blame | to Monterey Road. He for the dramatic increase in size from the | finds it hard to believe previous proposal. "One of the complaints | that an additional 50 to in the lawsuit was that the county had not \ 100 cars per day will have taken into account growth," he says. Indeed, a noticeable impact. the lawsuit argued that the county had violated CEQA specifically because it had failed much of the resistance to study the "foreseeable impacts due to the to the Cordoba Center Center's planned expansion." So SVIC lead- on fearmongering and ers looked at the history of their congrega- anti-Muslim bigotry. tion—which has grown from 1999's original "You would not believe 10 families to about 100 today, with an aver- we are living in the Bay Area," he says as age of 150 attendees during holidays—and | he describes the previous attempt to secure projected forward to the next 15 to 20 years, a building permit. "People were not bashful designing a facility for a maximum capacity | about saying whatever they wanted—this of 300 people. "We may not build the whole damn thing at one time," Akhter says, "but we are going to propose it, so you can do about the Cordoba Center was published your studies on the effect of a larger facilinthe *Gilroy Dispatch* in the spring of 2007. ity over time."

Pakistan, and came as a teenager to Indiana, and perhaps subdivide the land into three where he lived near cornfields. He moved to parcels, in order to build a church and a San Jose in 1990 to work in tech and relo- synagogue alongside the mosque. But when cated to San Martin in 2005. "I longed for | the reporter reached out to a prominent nice open spaces," he says. "And most people | church in Gilroy to gauge its interest, the out here do, too. We're not trying to urbanize a county. We're here to share."

We're speaking inside the barn mosque, seated across from each other on folding chairs. The white structure is set back from the road and surrounded by a dusty field filled with dozing sheep. The small building for holidays like Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, the SVIC is forced to rent out social halls or senior centers in Gilroy and Morgan Hill.

ple who say the project is out of character | applause after speculating that the proj-

the street," he says, refercharge that the mosque In 2016, Abbass's group submitted a new will add to traffic woes.

Rather, he blames

was unadulterated, raw stuff."

The first media account I could find In it, Akhter described how he hoped to con-Akhter, who is 53, grew up in Karachi, | nect with local Christian and Jewish groups, | 🗡 ш 🗦 pastor said he was skeptical of a faith that could produce the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Five years later, in the summer of 2012, several days before the planning commission gave a green light to the SVIC, a public forum was held in Morgan Hill. The event occurred during Ramadan, and Akhter was fills up quickly and has limited parking, so fasting, so he didn't take the mic until near the end, after he had been able to have a drink of water. He listened to a number of people criticize the mosque on religious Akhter has little sympathy with peo- grounds, including one man who drew



wife, who wears a hijab, and elbowed her while muttering under his breath. Another woman in a hijab was afraid to leave the building because she had to pass a group of people with anti-mosque signs. Eventually, a sheriff's deputy escorted the women to their cars. Akhter points to two other projects in San Martin to argue that much of the resistance to the mosque is fundamentally anti-Muslim. In 2015, the planning commission approved a Hindu temple's application to build a 6,000-square-foot worship hall along with a 4,900-square-foot barn and a 4,000-square-foot kitchen. The temple, Akhter says, "flew through the process"

without a single appeal or lawsuit. The

second project, currently under review by

speak and give them a description of the

project and was literally shouted down,"

he says. The room, packed with 200 people,

became so heated that a sheriff stood beside

him with his hand on his holster. "Honestly,

there was a concern that I might get lynched

or have somebody throw something at me,"

Akhter says. "It was that bad." After the

meeting, a large man walked by Akhter's

the planning department, is a 130-stall RV | protest in San Jose. "There was probably 150 shouting matches or protests at public meetings, like there was for us."

By federal law, Akhter's group has a builtsaid they would not be comfort-

able with a mosque in their neighborhood. One-third stated that the U.S. should stop all immigration from Muslim countries.

The most vocal opponent of the San Martin mosque is Georgine Scott-Codiga, president of the Gilroy-Morgan Hill Patriots, an offshoot of the Tea Party. Her politics aren't subtle. The Patriots' Facebook page is filled with links to articles with titles like "The Muslim Plot to Colonize America" and "It IS About Islam: This Is a War Against Evil." In a 2012 interview, she characterized the mosque as part of a national Muslim conspiracy to seek out "small rural areas" and take over; in the same interview, she said that she was attempting to find out more about the Cordoba Center's financial supporters, but had to be careful because "these people play to win" and she could "end up dead."

I track Scott-Codiga down at one of the Patriots' monthly meetings, held at the Lions Club in San Martin. Seated at a table in front of the stage, the Gilroy resident gives the mostly gray-haired crowd a recap of a recent anti-sharia law

park that would include a lodge, a gym, and a of us and a gazillion of them," she says with a swimming pool. The development would be laugh. The protest led her to go online to do built on vacant land adjacent to the mosque. some research, where she became obsessed Akhter isn't excited about having an RV park | with the Organization of Islamic Cooperafor a neighbor, but has observed that the tion, whose members represent 57 counreaction from San Martin residents has | tries. She learned that the OIC can serve been relatively muted. "There has not been | treaties to the United Nations, and that it that viciousness," he says. "There's been no conducts its legal business in English. What all this means isn't entirely clear, at least to me, though it caused her to conclude that, as she tells her group, "human rights, according to all Muslims, is sharia law."

Scott-Codiga, who is in her 50s, looks to be six feet tall and has dirty-blond hair and an unflappable confidence. After the meeting, she's friendly but declines to speak on the record. She calls me several days later, in advantage in this fight. The Religious | though, to say she changed her mind. When I Land Use and Institutionalized Persons ask her why she opposes the Cordoba Center, Act (RLUIPA) was passed by Congress in | she says that the biggest concern is the proj-2000 to prevent municipalities from using ect's size, and that it was designed to bring in zoning or land-use rules that were "unjus- people from the outside who would "change tifiably burdensome" on a specific reli- | the makeup of San Martin as we once knew gion. Muslims make up about 1 percent of | it." In spite of her insistence that there is the U.S. population, but from 2010 to 2016, "only one group of people I'm aware of pronearly 40 percent of the Religious Land Use voking all this terrorism in the world," she cases the government investigated involved | claims that her opposition to the mosque either mosques or Islamic schools. Perhaps | actually has little to do with religion. She this shouldn't be surprising. Nearly half of says she's concerned about what everyone the respondents in a recent national survey | else says they're concerned about: the size

of the project, the impact it would have on the environment, the precedent it would set. "It's hard to separate these things, but I like to think I'm a balanced person," she says.

That rationale is hard to square, however, with the fact that last year she invited Peter Friedman, who runs a virulently Islamophobic website called Islam Threat, to deliver a lecture in San Martin titled "What the Mosque Represents and the Threat of Islam." Friedman's organization has been labeled a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, though it's unclear if there is any "group" beyond Friedman himself. Friedman declined to speak with me, but he did share his Power-Point presentation for the lecture, which included photos of the World Trade Center in flames, along with graphic images of people mutilated in other terrorist attacks. His final slide warned, "Once mosques become built, they become a magnet for refugee resettlement, and there is no turning back!"

Below: The 16-acre spread San Martin remains The leadership of the San Martin Neighborhood Alliance does its best to steer clear of such talk, and CONTINUED ON PAGE 106



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in the past has kicked people off the group's listserv if they espoused anti-Muslim sentiments. "In every community, you're going to find a few people who have an extreme minority opinion," Reidel says. "And nowadays, in this country, especially given what's going on in Washington..." He estimates the anti-Muslim contingent in the South Valley to be fewer than 10 individuals and argues that their presence might actually help the mosque get built. "They provide very good ammunition for the folks who are sponsoring the project, to point to those people who are very vocal and say, 'Look, that's why this is being opposed."

It's impossible, of course, to determine how many people might oppose the mosque out of fear of Muslims but be savvy enough to couch their objections in more acceptable arguments about land use. Reidel mentions another group in San Martin (not Scott-Codiga's) that he characterizes as being "to the right of us on the political spectrum." The SMNA met with the leaders of the group, which Reidel declines to name, and explained that voicing objections to the mosque on religious terms was counterproductive. Reidel was pleasantly surprised when, in response, the group toned down its anti-Muslim rhetoric. That was politically smart. But there is a difference between hiding prejudice and eliminating it.

Akhter considers the SMNA organizers to be "very levelheaded" and acknowledges that they have genuine concerns. But he also believes that most of these concerns have already been addressed. He takes the example of the Cordoba Center's planned 3.5acre cemetery. Muslims traditionally bury their dead directly in the grave, wrapped in cotton sheets without embalming chemicals. The image of rotting bodies leeching into the groundwater has been the source of considerable fear on the part of many locals. "We do NOT want dead bodies decomposing and tons of sewage leeching into the groundwater that we use for cooking, bathing, and drinking," a San Martin couple wrote to the county in 2012.

Akhter says that extensive testing has repeatedly shown that the cemetery would have no adverse effects on

groundwater; in the previous application, the region's water quality board came to the same conclusion. But this issue has been used, according to Akhter, to generate irrational panic about the mosque. "We passed the standards by a mile," he says. "People say, 'Remember what happened with the Olin chemical plant?" In 2003, it was revealed that Olin, a Morgan Hill manufacturer of road flares, had for decades been disposing of a thyroiddamaging toxin called perchlorate that had seeped into groundwater. But the cemetery comparison is specious-unembalmed bodies don't contain toxic chemicals. "It's a completely irrelevant situation," Akhter says, looking exasperated, "but it's how they spread fear."

The county began work on the environmental impact report for the new Cordoba Center in January; barring some unforeseen delay or complication, it should be finished sometime this fall. Once the draft is published, there will be more public meetings to receive comments, after which the county will finalize the report. The report will then go to the planning commission, which will vote either to grant or to deny the permit to build. Regardless of how the commission rules, though, most people I spoke with are certain the case will end up in court. Akhter has no doubt that if his group is granted the permit, another party will come forward to sue the county. If the permit is denied, mosque opponents think, the South Valley Islamic Center will sue and assert that its religious freedom has been infringed. Not many people on either side think the process will be fair and impartial. Of course, they could all be wrong.

Back on the contested 16 acres, Abbass walks along the hillside and imagines his future spiritual home. He seems resigned to the idea that the project will not be the unifying force that he envisioned. "What's important now is that it gets built," Abbass says as he heads back down the path to his car. Once the buildings are up, he and his group plan to invite the rest of San Martin inside, host interfaith gatherings, and let local kids play on the playground. They hope to break bread with their new neighbors. It remains to be seen whether the same welcome will be extended to them.