

LDS temple projects impact com

From Nevada to Wyoming to Texas, small towns have become neighborhood battlegrounds amid the faith's historic temple-building spree.

By TAMARRA KEMSLEY

The Salt Lake Tribune

Erin DeLoe has been called a lot of things but never an agent of the devil. That changed after she and her husband, Matthew, became vocal opponents to the construction of a Latter-day Saint temple in their rural enclave located in the northwest corner of Las Vegas.

The couple are adamant. They have nothing against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or its members.

"Growing up, I actually went to girls' camp with my friends," Erin said, referring to the faith's summer sleep-away outings for teen girls. "I went to sacrament meetings, you know. My best friends growing up were all LDS."

What the DeLoes do have a problem with is the church's plans to build a 215-foot-high building with hundreds of parking spots in an area where residents sometimes ride horses in the street and the tallest things around are palm trees.

Due to their opposition, both say they've repeatedly been called bigots. Yard signs they plant opposing the temple disappear overnight and cars periodically sit at the end of their driveway, honking.

Others have taken an even bolder, briefer approach.

"We have people setting off fireworks," Erin said, "behind the homes of people who are coming out against [the temple]."

Temple proponents in Las Vegas and elsewhere, however, argue that the buildings' scope and designs are inextricably linked to their religious function and that opposition is rooted in NIMBY-ism ("not in my backyard").

This bitter battle is playing out in small towns from as far north as Wyoming and as far south as Texas as the Salt Lake City-based church seeks to plant more and more hotel-size worship spaces into communities that pride themselves on horizons and acre-size lots.

Fought largely — although not exclusively — along a member/nonmember divide, these sometimes-rancorous debates have ruptured friendships and pitted neighbor against neighbor, and are likely to multiply amid a historic temple-building spree.

Currently, the church has a list of more than 150 temples — considered bolder than a traditional meetinghouse — that are either under construction or planned, many in the United States.

"It's created a lot of division," Erin said, "within our community."

'ATMOSPHERE OF INTIMIDATION'

In a May 14 meeting that drew "unprecedented" crowds, the Las Vegas Planning Commission approved the site development review under the condition that the single-spired, three-story, 70,000-square-foot Lone Mountain Temple meets the neighborhood's lighting standards.



RACHEL ASTON / Special to The Tribune
Brigitte Solvie, above, president of the Northwest Rural Preservation Association, says the planned Lone Mountain Temple, shown left, outside Las Vegas, Nev., has been a source of contention.



The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

ing his vote in the temple's favor.

The City Council is expected to vote on the issue in July.

Many in the audience came dressed in navy blue, per a call issued on the church's Facebook page for members living in Las Vegas. The widely circulated clip encouraged those planning to show up in support of the temple to be "peacemakers."

But Brigitte Solvie, president of the nonprofit Northwest Rural Preservation Association, described the proposed building as a source of major contention for people in the area.

"I've talked to people whose relationships with LDS friends are breaking down," said Solvie, adding that professional ties have been strained as well under the weight of the heated debate surrounding the Lone Mountain Temple.

She and the DeLoes described, as Erin put it, an "atmosphere of intimidation" created by temple backers.

"We have people in the neighborhood, they're fearful," Erin said. "They're afraid to speak up. They won't put signs on their lawns because they're afraid of retaliation and having their homes damaged."

The DeLoes and Solvie said they also have spoken to business owners wary of weighing in, afraid that doing so could hurt their bottom line.

There's evidence they're right to be cautious. After Las Vegas photographer Victoria Bremner spoke out against the scale and size of the proposed temple, she received a one-star review on her business's Google page, along with the comment: "Victoria discriminates against other people because of their religious beliefs." Bremner said she had never received an inquiry from or worked with the person.

"We're in the United States of America, and there are people [living] in fear of a church,"

Erin said. "That's just my mind-blowing to me."

Worst of all, she and her husband said, has been the impact on their three kids, who have been labeled "bigots" at school.

"They're getting pummeled over this," Erin said, "and losing friends."

WHITE HAIRS

Meanwhile, in Cody, Wyoming, a tiny tourist town about 50 miles from Yellowstone National Park that boasts Buffalo Bill's final resting place, locals have been battling a proposed 10,000-square-foot temple on what is an open field.

"It's definitely given me a few more gray hairs than I had a year ago," Meyer Matt Hall said of the ongoing debate, explaining his wife tells him the new additions give him a distinguished look (he's less convinced).

The city's planning and zoning board approved a site plan for the temple and then rescinded it. Attorneys for the church sued, and the city relented, signing off on the site plan with some restrictions — including limits on outdoor lighting.

In response, the grassroots group Preserve Our Cody Neighborhoods quickly filed a petition in district court as a "last line of defense" against an LDS corporation that has threatened and intimidated our community "by going to court."

Asked about the fight's impact on the community of 10,000 residents, Hall said that "unfortunately it drew out some of the more negative aspects of people who just don't like Mormons, particularly online."

Happily, he said, most of the hateful rhetoric has "cooled off." Still, it's a reminder that in disputes over the nature and future of a community, neither side is rarely spared less-than-neighborly treatment.

OPPOSITION WITHIN THE RANKS

Adding to the difficulty for some Latter-day Saints in these communities is their own



An open field in Cody, Wyo., above, is the planned site of a 10,000-square-foot Latter-day Saint temple, shown at left in an artist's rendering.



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mixed feelings about the projects and the process by which the church pushes them forward.

Karly Green lives a few miles from the site of the proposed single-spired, multistory, 45,000-square-foot McKinney Temple located outside Dallas in the town of Fairview, home to 11,000 people.

Residents there have been hard at work proving the town motto — "Keeping it country" — is more than an empty slogan, mobilizing on line and off to resist the 173-foot-tall edifice in a district that restricts building heights to 35 feet. And Green said she doesn't blame them.

"I am opposed to the proposed height of the temple," she said, "due to the residential nature of the location — quite literally in residents' backyards."

Besides the building itself, Green also isn't thrilled with the way the church has managed the process.

In April, church officials emailed area members asking them to write the Fairview planning manager in support of the project, specifically the spire.

"The height of the steeple is part of our religious observance," the email stated, explaining that it serves "the purpose of lifting our eyes and thoughts to heaven" and "expresses a message of faith and devotion to God."

Green called this framing "misleading" (some Latter-day Saint temples, including ones in Hawaii and Arizona, have no steeple). She also said she is sympathetic to feeling among residents of being "spoken at instead of being listened to."

"The church had an opportunity to come to the community and ask for input," she said, "or find an area that would already accept the plan they had in place without having to fight for exemptions. Instead, Salt Lake headquarters has come with a plan that requires exemptions and is preemptively asking members to be on the defensive."

The approach may be backfiring. In a packed May 9 hearing, the town's planning and zoning committee voted to recommend

council members reject the proposal. According to CBS, the town's mayor plans to do just that, even with the church's attorney threatening to sue.

LACK OF CO

Joel Schmh is a dentist balking at the proposal as currently p

The high schooler, who'd been a member, would have lights. If the temple will share a fence

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Again and again, a distinction between church member

"nothing but cour church and its top has grown increas

"The thing that all they have to do and say, 'We un city wants, and standards," he sa That's what's so d the unwillingnes thing."

Las Vegas' Mat timent, saying th a "bad taste" in developer.

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