



The planned mosque and Islamic center blocks from ground zero got a new boost Wednesday from a coalition of supporters that includes families of Sept. 11 victims. New York Neighbors for American Values rallied for the first time at a municipal building near ground zero.

"I lost a 23-year-old son, a paramedic who gave his life saving Americans and their values," Talat Hamdani said, and supporting the Islamic center and mosque "has nothing to do with religion. It has to do with standing up for our human rights, including freedom of religion."

Among the nearly 2,800 people killed when the World Trade Center was attacked in 2001 were more than 30 Muslims, she noted. Opponents of the Islamic center project argue it's insensitive to the families and memories of Sept. 11 victims to build a mosque so close. Supporters cite freedom of religion.

The new coalition was started by members of 40 civic and religious organizations that "spontaneously called each other, because we had the feeling that something very negative was happening," said Susan Lerner, executive director of the New York office of the watchdog group Common Cause.

The controversy was triggered by "irresponsible politicians" using it as an election issue, she said. Names mentioned at the rally included former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Republican, and the highest-ranking Democrat in the Senate, Majority Leader Harry Reid.

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