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A MOSQUE AND A THINK TANK

We're growing up

What do a proposed \$11 million mosque in Vineland and the new William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey have in common?

Both are welcome signs that, culturally and intellectually, little old southern New Jersey is growing up.

The Hughes center — named after former longtime U.S. Rep. William J. Hughes — has a \$1 million endowment and was dedicated this week at a ceremony featuring Hughes, Gov. Jon S. Corzine, former Gov. James Florio and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a longtime colleague of Hughes. Heavy hitters, in other words.

The center, headed by Sharon Schulman, will serve as a think tank researching public-policy and economic issues, conducting polls and sponsoring political debates. In fact, the center has already jointly sponsored a poll with The Press of Atlantic City, and the newspaper and the center are the co-sponsors of a debate tonight for candidates in the Republican U.S. Senate primary. (The 90-minute debate among candidates Joseph Pennacchio, Murray Sabrin and Dick Zimmer will take place at 7 p.m. at Stockton's Townsend Residential Life Center.)

The Hughes center is a needed addition to the region's intellectual and political life. It will be a valuable, statewide source of information and research that will help voters and public officials make more informed decisions about the issues of the day. Welcome aboard.

But man does not live by politics alone — which brings us to the full-sized mosque that Dr. Hassan Salah, a Gloucester County pediatrician, hopes to bring to Vineland. The region's Muslims, for the most part, now worship in scattered, overcrowded storefronts and converted houses. Salah and his supporters hope to build the Garden State Islamic Center, which will include a mosque, a school and a sports center, on a seven-acre site at Maurice River Parkway and Almond Road.

The changing face of southern New Jersey is no secret. Muslims may not be among the original inhabitants of the region, but followers of Islam are a growing segment of the population. And an Islamic center like Salah is proposing could play a major role in both enriching the spiritual lives of the region's Muslims — and in fostering greater understanding of the world's largest religion by the region's non-Muslims.

It is also no secret that anti-Muslim xenophobia is now common here and elsewhere. But the Garden State Islamic Center should be welcomed, not feared. And by making the "foreign" more commonplace, the mosque, by its mere presence, can raise the level of cultural understanding in the region.

And who knows? Maybe some day in the not-too-far-off future, the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy and the Garden State Islamic Center will be jointly sponsoring research, polls, debates and other activities that enrich the lives of all of us in southern New Jersey.