

Park 51 and Beyond: Building Community from Controversy

An analysis and toolkit by Common Cause New York
With New York Neighbors for American Values

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Introduction

Last summer, a few right-wing Islamophobes, culminating several years of hateful effort, successfully created an international media tempest, adding the deceptive phrase “ground zero mosque” to the popular lexicon. Many New Yorkers watched in dismay as a small group of extremists disrupted a downtown Manhattan Community Board meeting and ignited an ever-growing media maelstrom, protesting a planned Islamic Center for downtown Manhattan.

We watched, astounded, as absurd accusations were picked up by New York media, and then following street protests by the extremists, by national and later by international press. Some of us couldn’t believe that the far-fetched claims of the right wing bloggers were being taken seriously and were convinced that they would die of their own weight. When political candidates in New York and elsewhere, and then members of Congress, took it upon themselves to attack the Islamic Center proposed for Park51, it seemed as if we were watching a fire out of control, being fanned and spread by a strong wind. We were angry and we were ashamed of the false picture of our city and our country being projected around the world during the slow news season. We cheered when New York City Mayor Bloomberg gave an eloquent speech that called on the best of American character and history and grateful to religious leaders who stood in solidarity and support of religious freedom. “Why aren’t there more voices for understanding and diversity being heard?” we wanted to know.

Out of that crisis, New York Neighbors for American Values was born; a coalition of more than 130 groups that came together to stand in support of Park51, reinforce the core American values of religious freedom and equality, and support elected leaders who had stepped forward and pushed back against the hatemongers. Our goal was to be a rational voice in the hysteria, reminding people of what makes our community and country strong – our ability to get along and work together, irrespective of our backgrounds.

In that summer’s volatile situation, we quickly gathered support, attracting 130 groups and many individuals to sign our organizational statement, building to nearly 3,000 Facebook friends in the space of 3 weeks and attracting over 2,000 people to a candlelight vigil held down the street from Park51 on September 10, 2010. Sadly, the worst damage had already been done. The attacks on Park51 proved to be one of a wave of incidents involving Islamic communities around the country.

In the ensuing year, we have learned a great deal about ourselves, our communities and their organizational strengths and challenges, as well as the pattern of behavior that provoked the Park51 controversy. We’ve thought about the things we wish we had done differently in the summer of 2010 and the things that we think went well. This report and the accompanying Community Activist’s Guide is a distillation of our experiences and our conversations with activists and community members facing similar attacks.

We hope that it will be a useful tool helping communities grow stronger and quelling future efforts by anti-Muslim bigots to incite media storms and false controversies.

Lessons Learned from the Summer of 2010

Lessons Learned	Examples from Park 51	Actions for the Future
Don't wait until it's too late!	<p>No one assumed that the controversy surrounding Park 51 would spin out of control in the way that it did, and while some were hoping it would die down on its own it continued to grow.</p>	<p>Prepare how you will describe your work and intentions beforehand. Anyone in the public eye needs to be able to clearly speak about their work, and this is especially important for groups that face extra and undue scrutiny, such as Muslims in the US.</p>
Create the story, don't let the story create you	<p>The term "ground-zero mosque" became irrevocably connected to Park 51 from very early on. For most Americans, it was their first introduction to the project. By the time people were hearing directly from the project's founders, they were already in the position of defending themselves against various allegations, which was an uphill battle in the 24-hour news cycle.</p> <p>Support was successfully solicited from Community Board One, and the downtown Manhattan community at large. However, reaching out to other stakeholders in this community that aren't necessarily residents, including 9/11 families and others might have created the opportunity to address some concerns before the project was being publicly debated.</p>	<p>Despite fears of being misquoted and misrepresented by media outlets, it is important to tell your own story from the beginning.</p> <p>This is true not only for media, but also for the communities you are engaging with who may see silence as suspicious, or feel betrayed when they hear about projects that will impact them through the media.</p>
Do not allow it to be cast as a "Muslim issue" or "Us vs. Them"	<p>NY Neighbors provided a space for Muslims and members of all communities to come together to oppose the anti-Muslim bigotry.</p> <p>Supporters of Park 51 cited examples of Japanese internment, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholic practices, and American Civil Rights movements, showing that anti-Muslim policies are part of a historical trend of discrimination against different groups in the United States.</p>	<p>Make sure non-Muslims and members of a diversity of communities are visibly involved</p> <p>Connect to other forms of discrimination or bigotry</p>

Lessons Learned	Examples from Park 51	Actions for the Future
<p>Be purposeful in choosing language and messaging</p>	<p>The founders of Park 51 and their supporters were initially unable to combat the harsh attacks of their project in the media, especially after a long period of moving forward with their plans without opposition. Nearly overnight, the media coverage spun out of control and the founders had yet to get clarity on some key aspects of the project.</p> <p>Many of the anti-Muslim figures leading the charge against Park 51 have extensive media experience and are drawing on messages that have been tested and determined to be effective in manipulating people’s emotions and masking their true agendas. In order to combat that, you must be extremely media savvy or have public relations help.</p>	<p>Spend time thinking carefully about how you will speak about your project or issue if there is any chance you may face opposition</p> <p>Choose spokespeople carefully, and consider media training or professional media assistance</p>
<p>Watch for key indicators that a controversy could be brewing</p>	<p>Pamela Geller’s blog was one of the first media outlets to report on the Park 51 project and continued to set the tone in the following months.</p> <p>The New York Post fanned the initial fires, calling it the “WTC Mosque”, and many of the local papers throughout the five boroughs published criticisms of the project.</p> <p>A NY Governor’s race and mid-term congressional elections provided fertile ground for candidates, even those outside of NYC, to use Park 51 as a wedge issue.</p> <p>While Mayor Bloomberg eventually took a strong stance of support for Park 51, both President Obama and Senate Majority Leader Reid questioned the wisdom of the location of Park 51, thus providing cover for politicians of all parties to withhold full support.</p> <p>The coverage of Park 51 was at its height during August, arguably the slowest month of the year for news, thus providing a sensationalist story that garnered millions of viewers, newspaper readers, and page views for the media outlets that covered it.</p>	<p>Key indicators:</p> <p>One of the major anti-Muslim figures have reported on it</p> <p>The local papers (including neighborhood weeklies) have reported on it</p> <p>There is an election approaching</p> <p>Major public figures, particularly those on the left, fail to provide strong leadership</p> <p>It is a typically slow news season</p>

Lessons Learned	Examples from Park 51	Actions for the Future
<p>Avoid divisive language and focus on messages that unite</p>	<p>Most attempts to defend the Park 51 project that attempted to convince others of the value of Islam as a religion fell on deaf ears. Though many Americans may have preconceptions about Islam that are damaging, the middle of a fiery controversy is not the time for these nuanced conversations.</p> <p>The spread of the phrase “ground zero mosque” was a masterful manipulation, and every time a media outlet or individual used that term to describe Park 51 it was a partial victory for the opposition. Many statements in support often began by stating that it was not a mosque and it was not at ground zero.</p> <p>In some cases, responding to the opposition called more attention to it, though it wasn’t always clear when to respond and when to let bigoted voices marginalize themselves.</p> <p>It was important to send the message that bigotry is unacceptable under any circumstances, and that any implication that Park 51 should not be built because it was a Muslim institution is antithetical to American values.</p>	<p>Pitfalls to Avoid: Debating religious ideologies</p> <p>Allowing the opposition to set the context of the issue</p> <p>Responding to everything the opposition does or says</p> <p>Speaking as though defending national security and maintaining civil liberties or opposing bigotry are not compatible</p>

Case Examples

While the summer of 2010 may have represented a “perfect storm” for a manufactured anti-Muslim controversy surrounding Park 51, we see that these dynamics are not new. There are many other high-profile cases, and countless stories that never reach the mainstream media, where Islamophobia has been used to manipulate the media and distort the political process. These selected case examples demonstrate that Park 51 was less an anomaly than an example of the ways in which anti-Muslim mania can be incited and sustained both in the media and within communities.

Case Example One: Khalil Gibran and Debbie Almontaser

The planning process for Khalil Gibran International Academy, New York City’s first Arab Dual Language program began in 2005¹. As a New York City public school, it was required to meet the same educational standards as other schools in the city, including the dozens of other dual language programs that featured Spanish, Chinese, French, Russian and other language instruction programs. Debbie Almontaser was brought in during the early planning stages and was eventually selected as the founding principal, bringing with her years of experience in both public education and interfaith work².

Public announcement of the school by the NYC Department of Education in February of 2007 was met with outrage from a small but vocal opposition to the school’s instruction of Arab language and culture³. Almontaser’s character and credibility were also attacked, her choice to wear a hijab engendering speculation that it was evidence of an “Islamist agenda”⁵. Some parents and community members from Park Slope protested at a PTA meeting on March 12th, 2007 against the original site for the school which would have shared space with another school and as a result a new, less ideal space in Boreum Hill was selected. The Stop the Madrassa Coalition was formed in June of 2007 to oppose the school incited by an article decrying the school by Daniel Pipes and included several noted anti-Islam activists⁷.

As the date for the school to open approached the opposition continued. The New York Post asked Almontaser to comment on a T-shirt printed by another organization with the motto “Intifada NYC”. Initially she did not want to comment at all since she was not connected to the production or distribution of the t-shirts, but was urged to by the Department of Education⁸. Perhaps overestimating the reliability of the publication she was speaking to, thought to use the opportunity as a “teaching moment” and gave a nuanced answer that sought to give some context for the Arabic word *intifada*. Almontaser’s words were distorted and ridiculed on August 6th, 2007 in the inflammatorily titled article, “City Principal is Revolting”⁹.

The Stop the Madrassa Coalition immediately led the charge to remove Almontaser from her post, asserting her comments were supportive of violence. The Department of Education asked her to release a statement apologizing, which she did, but was then asked to resign. On August 10th, 2007 Almontaser stepped down from her post as principal. The first day of school, September 4th, 2007, 55 students arrived for class as the organized opposition to the school continued to protest at the Department of Education¹⁰.

Communities in Support of Khalil Gibran, a voice of support for Almontaser, staged its first protest in front of the Department of Education on August 20th, 2007, launching a full-fledged campaign calling for her to be reinstated as principal. The coalition organized grassroots support in the form of letter writing campaigns, press conferences, sign-on letters and other tactics that were used to generate support for the cause. The group made sure to show that members of many faiths were in support of the school, refuting the idea that only Muslims cared about the issue or found the scrutiny faced by Almontaser to be discriminatory.

Nevertheless, the Department of Education found a permanent new principal to replace Almontaser. In 2010, years later, the Federal Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC), found her resignation to be in violation of the Equal Opportunities Act due to discrimination based on her race, religion and national origin. However, she was never reinstated as principal and the future of Khalil Gibran remains uncertain. Currently, the Arabic dual language component has been removed from the curriculum.

Almontaser says of her experience, “While I have endured a great injustice at the hands of people I trusted, the far larger offense has been to the Arab and Muslim communities of the United States...The attacks on me are part of a larger campaign to intimidate and silence marginalized communities. In response to these attacks I wholeheartedly continue to work with various groups locally and nationally to challenge Islamophobia, racism, and xenophobia¹¹. ”

Similar to Park 51, Khalil Gibran International Academy and Debbie Almontaser were introduced to the media predominantly through a negative lens. While they had initially planned to have a website up and running as well a dedicated communications staff person, when the school was publically announced neither of these were in place. New Yorkers, particularly the parents and community at the initial site in Park Slope, heard nothing but negative characterizations with no counter balance coming from the school or Department of Education to explain the values that grounded the project. As we saw in this case and numerous others, the media cannot be relied upon to offer balanced coverage. The opposition to the school clearly had a coordinated and well thought-out media strategy, taking a page from the now familiar Islamophobia playbook.

For a detailed analysis from Debbie Almontaser and Donna Nevel, a member of Communities in Support of Khalil Gibran Academy see: <http://monthlyreview.org/2011/07/01/khalil-gibran-international-academy>

[Case Example Two: The Staten Island Mosque](#)

Due to rising numbers of Muslims living in Staten Island, the Muslim American Association (MAS), a national organization with chapters in Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island, decided to open a mosque and community center in the Midland Beach section of Staten Island in the spring of 2010. After looking into several options, MAS settled on what appeared to be an ideal space: an empty former Catholic convent being sold by St. Margaret Mary Church¹².

The sale seemed to be proceeding without controversy until an article in the Staten Island Advance on May 21st, 2010 titled “Mystery Sale of Convent Riles Residents of Midland Beach” reported opposition to the sale of the convent by some residents citing concerns with the “mysterious” origins and intentions of MAS. Some of the members of the parents seemed particularly upset by the fact that the congregation was not informed of the sale by the pastor, Reverend Keith Fennessy before signing a contract with MAS¹³. Rev. Fennessy resigned shortly thereafter (effective July 1st), and a community meeting was scheduled with the purpose of allowing community members to hear directly from MAS about their plans for the site¹⁴.

On June 9th, three weeks after the initial article in the Staten Island Advance (and three days after a major rally in Manhattan against Park 51 on June 6th), The Midland Beach Civic Association held a meeting to discuss the sale, filling the room to capacity. The meeting was characterized by many as tense, angry and rowdy, eventually being shut down as audience members booed and jeered the MAS representatives¹⁵. The first “community member” to speak was Robert Spencer, a noted anti-Muslim activist and not a resident of Staten Island or New York City. Pamela Geller, another non-resident anti-Muslim activist, was also in attendance along with Stop the Islamization of America

members. Many Midland Beach residents, including those who supported the project, were unable to participate due to overcrowding. MAS was repeatedly asked to denounce terrorism and prove that they were not linked to terrorist organizations¹⁶. The pastor and the parish Board of Trustees voted on July 23rd, 2010 to back out of the sale¹⁷, hailed as a victory by the Islamophobes who appear to have organized and covered the protests on their blogs¹⁸.

In July of 2011 the MAS announced the new location of the mosque and community center, a former Hindu Temple, and hosted an open house for members of the community on July 29th, 2011. The open house exhibited a marked difference in tone from the Midland Beach Civic Association meeting, though media still published quotes from neighbors who were fearful of the mosque's attendees or felt that the mosque was somehow insensitive to those who had lost friends and family in the September 11th attacks¹⁹.

The parallels between the Staten Island mosque and Park 51 are evident. The overlap in timing may well have contributed to the similarities in the language used to denounce the mosque's founders and Islam in general. The overall frame used by those who were opposed to the mosque (Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer acting as leaders in both cases) was that it can be assumed that 1) All Muslims are connected to terrorist organizations; 2) All Muslims are responsible for the actions of other Muslims throughout the world. In both cases, it is impossible to prove the contrary, so any attempts made by the supporters of both mosques to deny any links to terrorism fell mostly on deaf ears. As long as the supporters of the mosques attempted to defend themselves against these bigoted views, they appeared to many as just that: defensive.

Supporters of the Midland Beach mosque were able to speak out for the rights of the Muslim community in the area to have a place of worship, holding several press conferences and mobilizing against the weekly demonstrations the opposition was holding every Sunday at the site for six weeks. In one instance, youth from the area held up signs reading "this is my country" and "where are my rights?". The following week, opposers to the mosque held signs reading "This is not your country", affirming the message that Muslims, even young people who were born in New York City, should always be considered outsiders and un-American.

Hesham El-Meligy, a Staten Island resident and community activist said this about his experience speaking out in support of the mosque: "I was compelled to stand up and speak up for the Constitutional rights and American values that were denied to my community, but I felt that sometimes my words were taken out of context and sometimes misunderstood". Throughout the summer, El-Meligy was often asked by the media to comment on the issue as a leader from the Muslim community on Staten Island. "At the press conference, I gave a speech that was comprehensive, conciliatory, explanatory, and extended our hands to the larger community towards more understanding, respect, and working together--yet the quote most media opted to use made me sound defiant, which may have further angered the opposition to the Mosque", El-Meligy added. In an effort to present more exciting stories, the media often pulls out the most divisive content, adding fuel to the fire and in this case helped in preventing that deal from going forward.

Though the mosque was eventually successful in securing a different location, the controversy surrounding the initial placement of the mosque remains a sensitive issue for the community.

Case Example Three: The Islamic Center of Long Island

The Islamic Center of Long Island is a long-standing institution in Westbury, founded in 1982 to serve the growing Muslim community in Nassau County. Over time, they moved and expanded their physical space to better accommodate the continued growth of the Muslim population in the area. In the fall of 2009, they filed a request to the zoning board to renovate and expand their building, adding three stories and doubling the amount of parking spaces (though their plans did not include the required number of parking spaces zoned for that size structure). The application was denied, and the Center and the zoning board began to negotiate.

Local media wrote about community opposition to the expansion project, insisting in an article on November 6, 2009 that the complaints were “quality of life” issues and not related to the religion or ethnicity of the mosque attendees²⁰. However, it was reported that one evening, a group of young people vandalized cars in the parking lot and damaged the windows of the center by throwing rocks²¹. Eventually, after over a year of working together with the zoning board, a modified expansion was approved in March of 2011, adding more parking spaces and 19,000 square feet to the building²².

This mosque expansion project did not experience the same kinds of attacks that other projects have, for a few reasons. One, since the center has been around for decades, members of the local community had some familiarity with the mosque and the community it serves. Two, and perhaps most importantly, this remained a local issue, with few outsiders coming in to fan the flames of Islamophobia. As Faroque Khan, a trustee of the center stated, “We have always had an open-door policy at the center, and have sponsored programs that the whole community can enjoy. As a result, our neighbors have known us and outside influences were unable to come in to cause problems”. In fact, a Newsday editorial called the situation a “model, not only for mosques, but for all construction controversies: Plan, talk, listen and compromise”²³.

While the Islamic Center has always partnered with the local community and the different faiths represented there, these experiences have confirmed the necessity of fostering trust, dialogue and tolerance. The center continues to engage with the community, including offering programming that seeks to heal the root causes of the kinds of discrimination and bigotry that has thrived in other communities.

Resources for Communities Organizing a Response

Guiding Questions:

- o What are your short- and long-term goals? Yes, you want to address this specific conflict, but what else is possible?
- o How can this effort support the larger cause of fighting anti-Muslim bigotry and discrimination against anyone on the basis of race, ethnicity or religious affiliation?
- o What is the message you want to tell in the media? Who are the best messengers to tell this story?
- o How do you want the opposition to be viewed in the media?

Planning Checklist:

Identifying the Issue

- **Figure out what is going on—who has a problem and what do they want?** This can be more difficult if the other side has already gotten to the media and has begun to spin the story in their favor. In order to move forward, you will need to understand clearly what the opposition wants. Depending on the situation, it may be worth reaching out directly (and non-confrontationally) to find that out. Be mindful that what they say publicly may not reveal the whole story. Examples may include groups opposing the construction of a Mosque, outrage at a statement or action in support of Muslim's rights, a politician calling for a policy that would discriminate against Muslims, etc.

Research

- **Research the history of the conflict.** Is this the first time there has been a flare up like this in the community? Who are the key players on both sides? Who are the people who can make decisions that will impact the situation? (examples include zoning boards, community boards, the City Council, the Mayor, State Legislators, City Agencies, and in some cases private businesses).
- **Research the other side.** This will have a big impact on the kind of strategy you should take, so make sure to get as much information you can on who is opposing you. If a prominent anti-Muslim activist is involved (see section) your issue is more likely to become a national issue that spins out of control. Some of these individuals are well-funded and well-connected, and you may find them on a national news broadcast giving their side before you know it. Monitor their blogs to see if they have taken an interest in (or have instigated) the conflict.
- **Research any practical concerns** that may be allowing the opposition to mask anti-Muslim sentiment. For example, in many cases where there is opposition to Mosque construction parking and traffic concerns are cited as major reasons the projects should not continue. In these cases, there may be individuals who would support the project if those concerns were addressed. By removing these roadblocks (if you are able to) you also are able to expose those who are motivated by hate.

- **Research media coverage that has already occurred.** What media outlets have picked up on the story (local, citywide, national, and or international)? What is the perceived political leaning of these outlets? Has the story been reported accurately? Who has been quoted or interviewed?

Connect with Allies

- **Begin building a network** of individuals and organizations that are supportive of your position. As much as is possible, make sure to have a diversity of allies representing various perspectives, skill-sets and connections to key players. In many cases, there will be some existing structures (coalitions, organizations, etc) who work on similar issues. Decide how you will communicate (email list, Facebook page, etc).
- **Be aware of internal conflicts.** Though individuals may be eager to come together around this issue, there will almost certainly not be agreement about how best to respond, or who is best to represent the issue. It is important to address some of these issues before going public, as it will likely exacerbate any internal conflicts.

Develop a Strategy

- Now that you know what the problem is, how the issue developed, and who your allies are, you can begin to **decide what actions you will take** and how they fit into a larger strategy.
- Since you already identified who they are, now you have to determine how to **get the decision makers to side in your favor.** If they happen to be on your side, it is also important that you are able to stand in support of them in case of a backlash. A media controversy can cause a retraction of support, so it's important that you can generate some positive coverage of the issue.
- Because these issues have a way of spinning out of control when the media takes a hold of them, **you must have a proactive media strategy.** Decide 3-4 main messages you want to get across in the media and find different ways of inserting them into each encounter you have with a media professional. Contact the outlets who have already reported on the issues and pitch your version of the story to them. Let them know you have a network of people who are available for comment on the topic. Be purposeful and clear—it's very easy for these things to get distorted in the media.

Build Relationships with Key Players

- Do the decision makers know your position on the issue? Work to get direct contact with them so you can **educate them on the issue and generate their support.** If you don't have access to them, reach out to other individuals who do have access or influence over the decision makers.
- As you were developing your strategy, you probably identified areas that others could help, either in solving the immediate problem, pressuring the decision makers or in getting the message out to the media. **Reach out to these players and see where they are willing and able to help.**

Implement your Strategy

- **Your strategy may involve various tactics**, depending on what your overall goals are. You might have: meetings with elected officials, letter writing campaigns, petitions, marches or rallies, social media activism, and many other actions. It is important that every action that you decide to implement fit into your overall strategy. You don't want to waste time, energy or resources on something that doesn't explicitly move your issue in the right direction.
- **A media strategy will usually include:** developing relationships with reporters, identifying and preparing spokespeople, press conferences, getting Op-Eds published, building a presence on social media (Twitter, Facebook, and commenting with your positive message on articles on the topic).
- **Demonstrate how much public support you have.** You can do this in various ways, and are of course not limited to one: Publicize a list of endorsers or supporters, draft a letter articulating your position and have your allies sign on, organize events that mobilize large numbers of people, gather signatures for a petition, distribute buttons or stickers with a slogan on them, and many other creative ways.

Communicate with Stakeholders

- Make sure to **keep your allies and others who are impacted by the issue updated** on how your strategy is progressing. It is also important to keep channels open for feedback, as you may need new ideas or input from a different perspective to move forward.

Evaluate Successes, Alter Strategy As Needed

- **Be realistic** about how well you are implementing your strategy and if there is a need to shift gears.
- **Reassess the situation:** How well are people responding to your message? Are there new key players in the mix? Have the details in the story changed? Are there any missing pieces you need to bring into your strategy?

Document and Share Lessons Learned

- It is important that people do not waste time by reinventing the wheel. Many communities have come together to fight hate and intolerance, and many will likely come after you. **Share your successes and what you have learned** with those that could utilize similar strategies should the need arise in their communities. Post your materials on websites, speak about your work at conferences and other gatherings, and continue to be available for media requests.

How Can We Prepare Before a Controversy Occurs?

In some cases it is impossible to anticipate what kinds of activities, projects or individuals will become targets of this kind of Islamophobic ire, and when a controversy could hit. However, there are clearly some conclusions we can draw about the types of things that are particularly vulnerable to attack: 1) new Mosque construction 2) Mosque growth and expansion 3) Public institutions, such as schools, that educate about Muslim or Arab culture (even as part of a full multi-cultural curriculum) 4) Institutions that receive public funds of any kind that serve the needs of Muslims (even as they serve other communities). Anyone involved in a project like those described should be aware that they are likely targets for opposition.

Additionally, there are individuals who are targeted because of their strong leadership on Muslim's rights, and any project that they undertake will be given extra scrutiny. Both Muslims and non-Muslims who publically stand against anti-Muslim bigotry may very well face opposition to many of their endeavors as they can be permanently painted in some circles as "Islamists" "Jihadists" "radicals" or "terrorist sympathizers".

If you fall under any of the above categories, here are some suggestions for what you can do to prepare for possible hostility:

- Learn everything you can about the community you are in, whether it is a geographical area or a community at large.
- Introduce yourself and/or your project before it is ready to become public. This is true even if you have been living and working in this community for a long time; you still should purposefully engage with those outside of your regular acquaintance.
- Ideally, you should have some mechanism for public input, particularly if this is a construction project. Then those with concrete concerns may find a way to have them addressed, and people won't feel like they have been deceived.
- Meet with local elected officials, bringing constituents when possible. Public figures should be reminded that they are representing you.
- Establish relationships with local press, such as the neighborhood weeklies, or smaller daily newspapers. They are often looking for personal interest stories, so you can pitch a story to them that highlights the positive aspects of what you are trying to do.
- You can probably guess the kinds of arguments an opposition would form around your project. Write up your own messages to anticipate and undercut their lies. Of course, this may not stop a controversy from occurring, but you will certainly be in a much better position to withstand it and potentially diffuse it.

A Funded, Organized, Anti-Muslim Opposition

As detailed in both the People for the American Way's report, *The Right-wing Playbook on Anti-Muslim Extremism* and The Center for American Progress' report *Fear Inc: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America*, there is a well-funded network of anti-Muslim organizations and activists who are at the center of many of these Islamophobic controversies. Though they would like to present their perspective as representing the average concerned and patriotic American, the bigotry that they espouse is only representative of an extremist view shared by few.

If you are facing opposition from someone connected to this network, expect a coordinated response. It is especially important to be clear on your media strategy because you will be up against a carefully constructed messages asserting the fundamentally dangerous nature of Islam. Fear and intolerance are stoked by consistent repetition of various myths about Islam: That Islam is a political movement and not a religion; that there is a secret movement at all levels of government to implement Islamic law in the United States; that Islam is not compatible with American law and customs; that individual Muslims have a duty to act violently towards non-Muslims. These messages were purposefully created to further an anti-Muslim agenda and are replayed over and over again, compounded by the sensationalist nature of some news outlets that use images of fear, division and controversy to increase viewers, readers and page views²⁴.

In fact, many people benefit financially and otherwise by perpetuating myths about Muslims in the United States, including some individuals whose livelihood depends on it. This includes authors, activists, bloggers, trainers and others who make a profit off of their Islamophobic rhetoric²⁵. If an anti-Muslim controversy is beginning to brew, one of the first steps to take is to see if it is being furthered by any of the individuals or groups below. Monitoring their websites from time to time is a good way to stay up to date with the strategies and messaging they are using, so you won't be caught off guard if you find yourself or your community in their crosshairs.

Nonie Darwish: – <http://nonie-darwish.blogspot.com/>

Frank Gaffney: – Think Progress Profile <http://thinkprogress.org/frank-gaffney-founder-center-for-security-policy/>
– Background on Geller and Spencer <http://mediamatters.org/research/201106080012>
– Norway Terrorist Cited Islamophobic pundits
<http://thinkprogress.org/security/2011/07/25/278677/islamophobic-right-wing-blogger-breivi/>

Pamela Geller: – <http://atlasshrugs2000.typepad.com/>
– NYtimes profile <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/nyregion/10geller.html?r=1&hp=&pagewanted=all>

Daniel Pipes: – <http://www.danielpipes.org/>

Walid Shoebat: – <http://www.shoebat.com/>
– CNN expose <http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/07/11/terrorism.expert/index.html>
– <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2011/07/13/ac360-preview-ex-terrorist-rakes-in-homeland-security-bucks/>

Robert Spencer: – Official blog-Jihad Watch <http://www.jihadwatch.org/>

Stop Islamization of America: – <http://stopislamizationofamerica.blogspot.com/>

The Religious Freedom Coalition – <http://www.religiousfreedomcoalition.org/>

Reports on Anti-Islam Network:

The Right-wing Playbook on Anti-Muslim Extremism- People for the American Way-
<http://www.pfaw.org/rww-in-focus/the-right-wing-playbook-anti-muslim-extremism>

Fear, Inc. The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America- Center for American Progress
<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/08/islamophobia.html>
<http://mediamatters.org/blog/201108260020>

Manufacturing the Muslim Menace: Private Firms, Public Servants, and the Threat to Rights and Security –
Political Research Associates (Thomas Cincotta)
http://www.publiceye.org/liberty/training/Muslim_Menace_Complete.pdf

Allies and Organizational Resources

There is a wealth of organizations and community leaders who may be able to offer assistance in the fight against anti-Muslim bigotry and discrimination against anyone on the basis of race, ethnicity or religious affiliation. Below are some organizations who may be able to help; some offer individual case management, civil rights advocacy, media relations, community organizing and interfaith work. Visit their websites to determine if they are the right resource for you.

American Civil Liberties Union	www.aclu.org 212-549-2500	New York Civil Liberties Union www.nyclu.org 212-607-3300
The Arab American Family Support Center	www.aafscny.org 718-797-0410	
Arab American Association of New York	www.arabamericanny.org 718-745-3523	
The Brennan Center for Justice	www.brennancenter.org 646-292-8310	
The Center for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)	www.cair.com 202.488.8787	CAIR-NY www.cair-ny.org 212-870-2002
Cordoba Initiative	www.cordobainitiative.org 212.870.2552	
The Interfaith Center of New York	www.interfaithcenter.org 212-870-3510	
Muslim Consultative Network	www.mcnny.org 718.512.5176	
The New York Immigration Coalition	www.thenyic.org 212-627-2227	
New York Neighbors for American Values	www.nyneighbors.org 212-691-6421	
Not In Our Town	www.niot.org	

Media Resources

Here are some general online resources that could help you learn more about how to effectively get your message across in the media.

Americans Against Islamophobia	http://www.islamophobiato-day.com/category/islamophobia-watch-com/
Change the Story	www.changethestory.net
ReThink Media	www.rethinkmedia.org
The Spin Project	www.spinproject.org

Endnotes

¹ Andrea Elliott and Alexis Mainland, "Debbie Almontaser: The Path to Resignation," The New York Times, 27 April, 2008.

² Debbie Almontaser and Donna Nevel, "The Story of Khalil Gibran International Academy: Racism and a Campaign of Resistance," The Monthly Review, Vol 63, Issue 3, 2011.

³ Pamela Geller, "NYC to Open Arabic Public School," 13 February, 2007.

⁴ Daniel Pipes, "A Madrassa Grows in Brooklyn," The New York Sun, 24 April, 2007. Available at <http://www.nysun.com/foreign/madrassa-grows-in-brooklyn/53060/>. Last visited 7 November.

⁵ "Khalil Gibran Principal Almontaser Undergoes PR Makover (sic) Switches Clothes and Headcovering in Attempt to Disguise (sic) Islamist Agenda," MilitantIslamMonitor.org. Available at <http://www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/2823>, last visited 7 November.

⁶ Dana Rubinstein, "Holy War! Slope Parents Protest Arabic School Plan," The Brooklyn Paper, 17 March, 2007.

⁷ Pipes

⁸ Almontaser and Nevel

⁹ Chuck Bennett and Jana Winter, "City Principal is 'Revolting' Tied to 'Intifada NYC' shirts," New York Post, 6 August 2007.

¹⁰ Elliot and Mainland

¹¹ Almontaser and Nevel

¹² Paul Vitello, "Heated Opposition to a Proposed Mosque," The New York Times, 10 June 2010.

¹³ Virginia Sherry, "'Mystery Sale' of Convent Riles Residents of Midland Beach," Staten Island Advance, 21 May 2010.

¹⁴ Amy Padnani, "Mosque Pastor Bails Out of Midland Beach Parish," Staten Island Advance, 4 June, 2010.

¹⁵ Vitello

¹⁶ Robert Spencer, "Selling Out the People on Staten Island," Jihadwatch.org, 9 June, 2010. Available at <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2010/06/selling-out-the-people-on.html>. Last visited 7 November.

¹⁷ Amy Padnani, "No Midland Beach Mosque- Convent Sale Cancelled," Staten Island Advance, 23 July, 2010.

¹⁸ Pamela Gellar, "Victory! No Muslim Brotherhood MAS Mosque in Staten Island," Atlasshrugs blog, 22 July, 2010. Robert Spencer, "Victory: Catholic Church Cancels Sale of Staten Island Convent to Muslim Brotherhood," Jihad-watch.org, 22 July, 2010.

¹⁹ Maura Grunlund , “New Mosque Comes to Dongan Hills Section of Staten Island,” Staten Island Advance, 25 July, 2011.

²⁰ Victoria Caruso-Davis, “Islamic Center Seeking Variance to Expand Mosque,” Westbury Times, 6, November 2009.

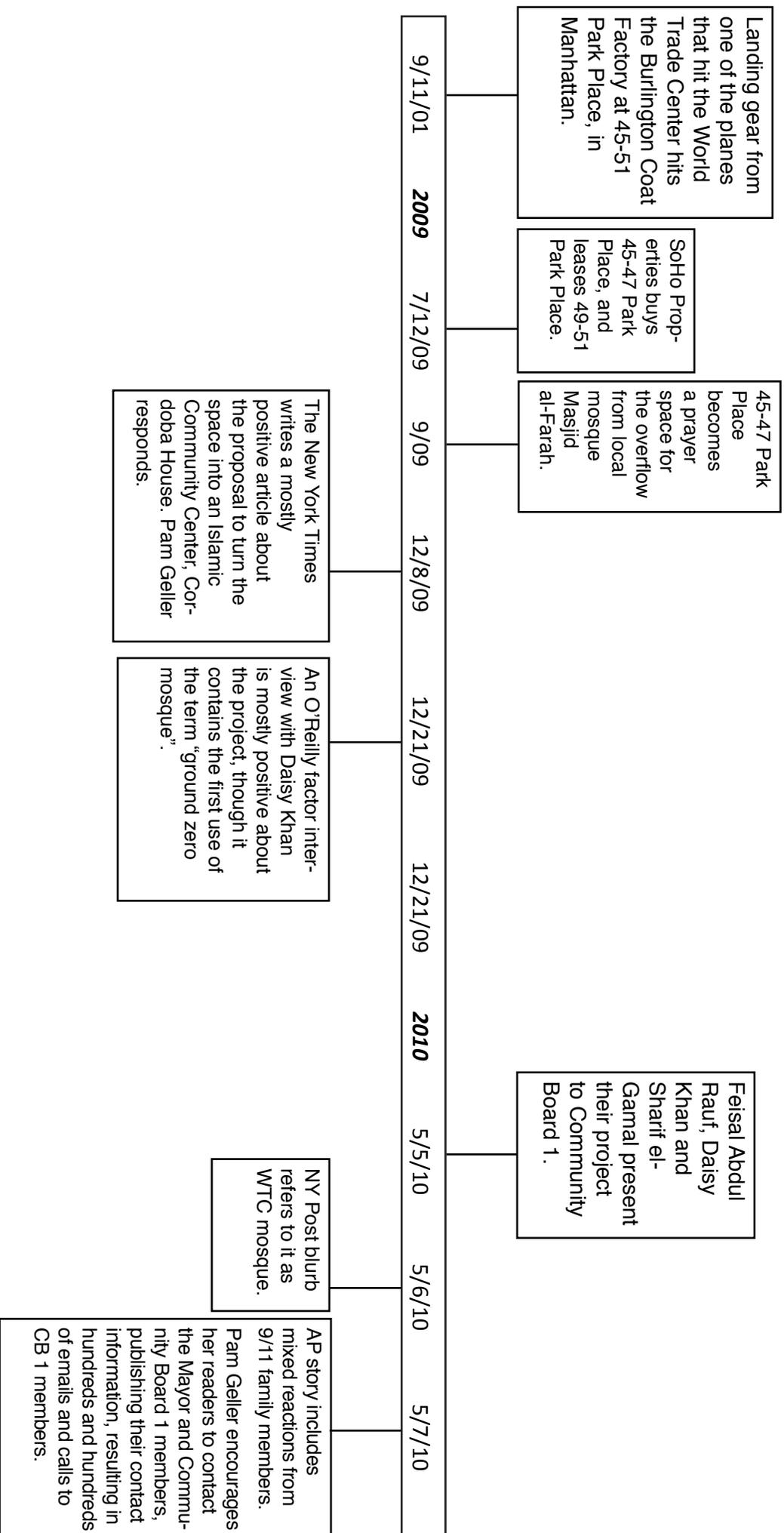
²¹ Farah Akbar, “Controversy Over Islam and Mosques Spreads Beyond Park 51,” Gotham Gazette, 14 September 2010. Available at <http://www.gothamgazette.com/print/3362>. Last visited 7 November.

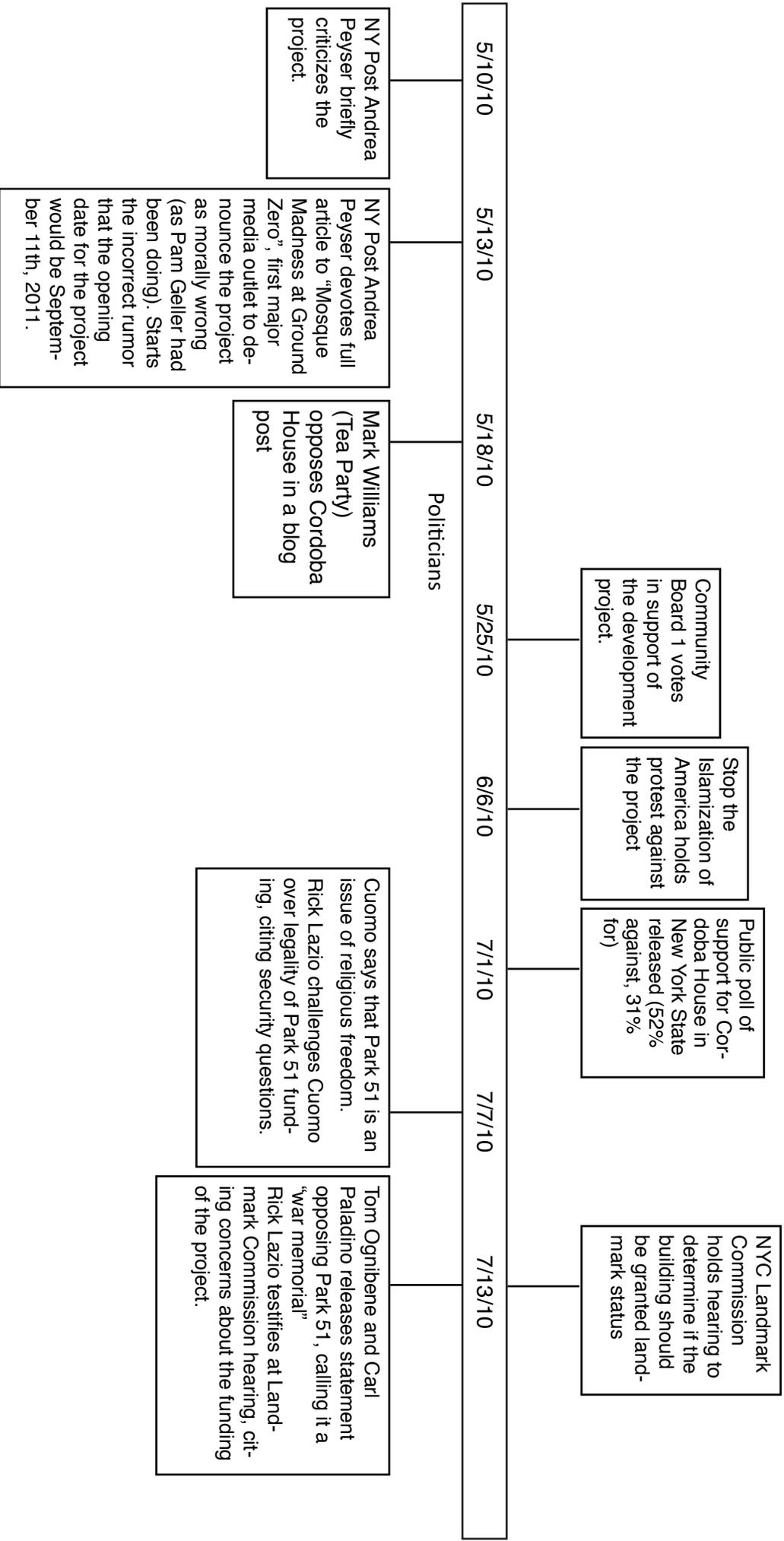
²² Bart Jones, “Westbury Gives OK to Mosque Expansion,” Newsday, 1 March, 2011.

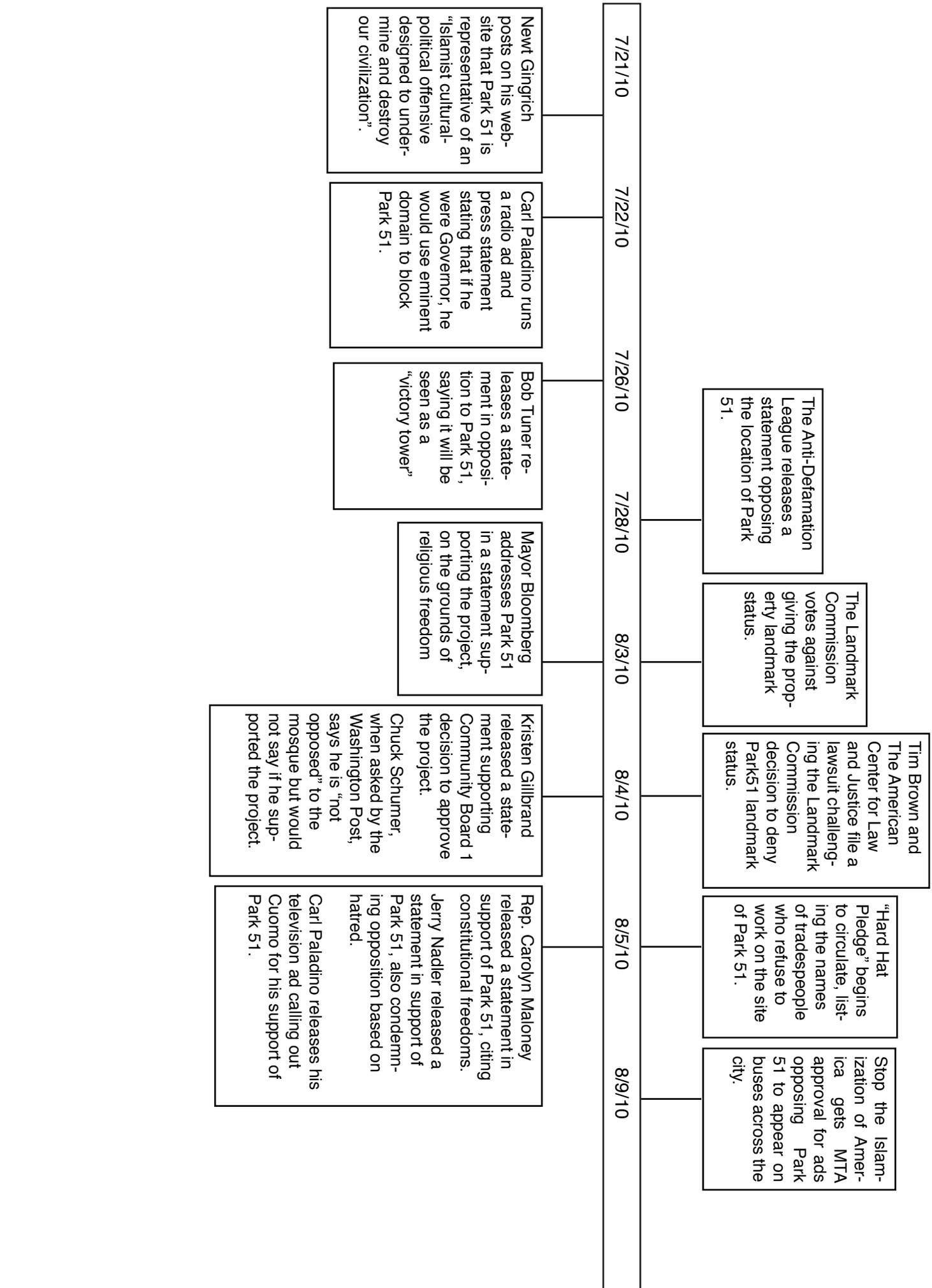
²³ “Mosque Seen as Building Issue,” Newsday, 2 March, 2011.

²⁴ People for the American Way, “The Right Wing Playbook on Anti-Muslim Extremism,” 2011. Available at <http://www.pfaw.org/rww-in-focus/the-right-wing-playbook-anti-muslim-extremism>. Last visited 7 November.

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Sharif El-Gamal and Daisy Khan meet with community groups and other individuals and organizations who want to support the project. Many of these groups would go on to found New York Neighbors.

Public poll of support for Park 51 in New York State released (61% against, 24% for).

8/10/10 8/12/10 8/13/10 8/16/10 8/20/10 8/22/10 8/23/10 8/25/10

First meeting of groups that would become New York Neighbors for American Values in which they determine to hold a press conference and vigil on September 10th.

New York Neighbors creates a google-group to communicate.

Major protest against the project, significant numbers of supporters also demonstrate calling opposition racist.

The group votes on the name "New York Neighbors for American Values" and finalizes the organizing principles that unite them.

New York Neighbors holds 2nd coalition meeting and press conference at noon at City Hall. The event is covered by local and national press, including a live stream on CNN. Immediately, the coalition receives a flood of media requests from press eager to hear from supporters.

Mayor Bloomberg endorses the project.

Obama acknowledges the right of the project to build. Carl Paladino releases a statement calling for the World Trade Center District of Manhattan to be declared a war memorial, hoping to stop construction of Park 51.

