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State seeks to enhance protection from terror

by AnnMarie Costella, Chronicle Reporter
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In an effort to protect nonprofit institutions from future terrorist attacks, a study will be conducted by the state Office of Homeland Security to better assess their needs and develop strategies to protect them.

The collection of information, which is mandated under the Nonprofit Homeland Security Preparedness Study Act recently passed by the state, has already begun with a hearing on Dec. 15.

“New York State is home to thousands of nonprofit cultural, religious and educational institutions which are at an increased risk of terrorist attack since 9/11,” said Assemblyman Rory Lancman (D-Fresh Meadows), who fought to get the legislation passed. “Pretending that there isn’t a problem is not an option.”

Lancman began advocating for the legislation in 2007 because he felt existing federal programs were not providing the state with adequate anti-terror funding.

Numerous organization presented testimony at the hearing including the Orthodox Union, Lincoln Center, the Jewish Community Relations Council and the [Northeast Queens Jewish Community Council](#).

Corey Bearak, chairman of NEQJCC, says the more than 30 religious, educational, fraternal and community groups, included in the organization have not experienced anything beyond some threatening letters and a few defaced buildings. Nevertheless, he believes they could use some additional protection.

“I’ve always believed in prevention,” he said. “When you attack an institution of worship, even when no one gets hurt, it does damage to worshippers because they feel violated and unsafe to practice their faith.”

The JCRC has advised area organizations to take precautions to prevent a terrorist attack and the Northeast Queens group is doing its best to heed that warning given its limited resources. However, Bearak would not say what steps the council advised them to take or what they are doing to protect themselves.

“I don’t want to give anything away to anyone who would want to perpetrate harm against any of our institutions,” he said.

In addition to the testimony presented at the hearing, OHS is asking nonprofit groups to fill out an online survey by Jan. 15, the results of which will be compiled into a report and presented to the state Legislature on March 31. The preparation of the data will not require additional funding or resources because it will be compiled solely by OHS staff.

Kevin Leifer, president of Young Israel of Hillcrest Synagogue, says in the past vandals have defaced the property with swastikas, but they have never come close to a terrorist attack.

The building has minimal security, which consists of surveillance cameras affixed around the perimeter of the building and don’t work very well, according to Leifer. During the high holidays security personnel is placed at entranceways.

The house of worship has old doors, poor lighting and much like the average home, maximum street exposure, all conditions which Leifer believes leave it vulnerable to a possible attack.

“Whether or not you have been the victim of an attack, you need to be proactive to prevent such things from happening,” Leifer said. “We are a very visible synagogue — I believe the largest Orthodox Jewish synagogue in Queens — and that certainly makes us a viable target.”

In the Christian community, concerns have not been as prevalent as elsewhere, at least according to one local leader.

“It is not something that I am hearing from clergy and Christian leaders, but rather from our colleagues in the Jewish and Muslim communities.” said the Rev. N.J. L’Heureux, executive director of the Queens Federation of Churches.

One Jewish leader, however, believes the money and resources that would be doled out as a result of the survey could be better spent elsewhere, although he conceded that if his synagogue was offered help it would certainly accept it.

“I am opposed to keeping people living in fear,” said Rabbi Michael Weisser of the Free Synagogue of Flushing. “I think we just have to be cautious during big events.”

Weisser has visited many Muslim mosques and says he has always felt welcome. “I don’t think the average Muslim has a bone to pick with people of the Jewish faith,” he said.

Weisser believes a large increase in security is unnecessary particularly since he could not recall a terrorist attack against any synagogue in the United States in recent history. However, there

was one recent foiled attempt.

In May, the FBI uncovered a plot to simultaneously blow up two Bronx synagogues and a plane that was organized by four men who were part of a homegrown terrorist cell. Their plans were foiled, however, when they realized the explosives they'd planned to use were fake — supplied by undercover FBI agents.

Weisser didn't think much of the attempt and called the perpetrators "incompetent boobs."

More recently, in October, a gunman shot and wounded two worshippers in the parking garage underneath the Adat Yeshurun Valley Sephardic Orthodox synagogue in North Hollywood, Calif. Police are investigating the incident as a hate crime.

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