

The Capital

Top Stories

County's rules on developers begin with some stumbles

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

Nearly an hour into a county-mandated public meeting on a proposed shopping center next to Lee Airport, County Council Chairman Ed Reilly rose to tell those gathered that as per a new rule, the developer would be reporting their concerns to county planners.

He then asked if the developer was taking notes.

As proof that his company was complying with the requirement, the developer's engineer held up a mostly blank pad of paper with about two lines scribbled on it.

That sight was met with howls of disbelief from the crowd of residents who had spent almost an hour expressing their worries about stormwater runoff, the size of the development and impervious surfaces.

While the county recently began requiring builders to hold public meetings on their projects and pass on the comments to county officials, the results have been mixed, according to some community activists and others attending the meetings.

They say:

Developers record public comment in varying detail, from copious to paltry.

Notice of the meetings, or changes in them, are not always posted in a timely fashion, if at all.

Meetings have not been held at a time and place conducive to attendance.

The County Council passed the new rules in April as part of an overhaul of subdivision and zoning codes. But problems soon emerged, prompting the council to try to correct them in an amended version in December.

The legislative fine-tuning that went into effect Feb. 6, though mandating a record of public comment be forwarded to county planners, avoided any specific guidelines for the meetings. "Our aim is to get the citizens and developers ... in the room ... to get them talking," said Mr. Reilly, R-Crofton.

Some residents are glad to see a legal requirement taking the place of what has long been an informal process.

Glen Haller and his neighbors in Linthicum have been meeting informally with two Howard County developers who hope to turn 26 acres into a convention center, hotel and retail complex with a water park.

After the meetings, the developers, who need 12 acres rezoned, have altered the plan to

accommodate community concerns. No plans have been submitted to the county yet. "The community is still struggling with where they stand," Mr. Haller said. "But I am glad there is a formal process to go through."

Others say the new system is not enough. "If it's going to work it has to be done correctly," said Don Avery, whose family has lived in Deale since the 1880s. "There has to be some standard as to what is presented. They should have a handout, a reduced drawing of the plan. It is difficult to know what is going on without having something to follow."

Developers also say there is not enough direction from the county. Charles Snyder, who has held one public meeting about a plan to build 32 homes in Deale, said meetings should come later in the process when plans are more defined. "I am a little confused, and I am sure I am not the only builder out here (who is)," Mr. Snyder said.

Old rules

Under the old rules, developer progress meetings were open to the public, but were meant to exchange information between county planners and the developer.

"The new meetings require developers meet directly with the public most impacted by the proposed project," said Pam Jordan, county land use spokesman. "These meetings give the public an opportunity to track the project, ask questions and provide comments."

According to the latest changes, minutes of each meeting must be sent to all participants and neighbors within 250 feet of a project and they can forward comments on those notes to county planners processing an application.

Meetings must be held at a handicapped-accessible public building and in the evening, so more people can attend.

"That is something that will certainly help," said Bruce McPherson, president of the Greater Odenton Improvement Association, which is looking at explosive growth tied to mass transit and expansion at Fort George G. Meade.

"Holding (the meetings) at night will make it easier ... since most people have to work during the day," Mr. McPherson said.

Meeting the minimum letter of the law has not satisfied some people who've turned out to hear details of projects.

Landowner Albert Lord's meeting last month was technically about the subdivision of the 243 acres in Lothian that he wants to turn into a private golf club.

His engineer tried to limit the meeting to a brief discussion of that element only. But the 60 people attending would not have it - they wanted to know much more about the project.

Mr. Lord rose from his seat on the periphery of the crowd to field questions about his plans, which mollified the crowd.

Other meetings have been more thorough at the outset.

The Village at Lee Airpark meeting held by Regency Centers Corp. two weeks ago included lots of details, but the first question from the floor was whether the community's comments would have any bearing on the overall plan.

Regency's Mark Huffman answered: "We will, we will consider what you say. Whatever has merit, we will incorporate it."

But then about an hour into the meeting his reaction to the crowd's howl when they saw only scant notes had been taken was: "We are required to take minutes?"

After obtaining a recording of the proceedings from local radio station WRYR FM, Regency was able to put together a seven-page account that was mailed to participants.

"We have met our obligation," he said.

It was not the first time Regency had met with area residents. Several meetings have been held with a conservancy group making sure the plan meets details of a long-negotiated covenant on the property along Route 2. A second meeting, to discuss the plan will be March 7 at the county police Southern District Station in Edgewater.

Public notice

Notice of a meeting is supposed to be sent to residents living near the project, the local community association and county councilman. It's also supposed to be listed on the county Web site.

In Deale, when Snyder Development pitched its new plan for 25 acres on two parcels, some neighbors within 250 feet of the 32-home plan were there to listen.

But others who might have attended did not get the chance because the meeting never appeared on the county Web site.

Mr. Snyder sent a detailed 75-page account of what transpired at the meeting, but he has been directed to hold another meeting on March 7.

"I like the meetings, but I don't think this is the best way to go about it," he said.

Both the Lee and Snyder meetings are scheduled at the same time, 7 p.m.

That poses a problem for those who try to keep tabs on major developments in south county.

Mike Shay, who records public meetings for re-broadcast on WRYR thinks scheduling the meetings more carefully will allow more people to attend.

Changes in meeting schedules have been a problem as well.

Mr. Avery went to a midday meeting about proposed changes to a parcel in Churchton two weeks ago, only to find it had been canceled.

He said no notice was either sent or posted on the county Web site about the change.

"I check (the Web site) every day. It was not there until the next day," Mr. Avery said.

Ms. Jordan said the county did not have enough information to post the Snyder meeting, but Mr. Snyder had the meeting anyway. As to the postponement notice, she said the change had been posted in time. "It is a new process for everybody, and there will be glitches," Ms. Jordan said. "However the office of Planning and Zoning is making every effort to guide the development community through new process and is posting things in a timely fashion."

Mr. Reilly thinks the process bringing developers and residents together is working.

"At this (point) I am comfortable with what is going on. Some developers do a great job, some don't," Mr. Reilly said. "Some just meet the minimum requirements, while others are meeting the spirit of the law, going to great lengths to provide detailed plats and sketches."

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