

Officials accused of violating open meetings law

Environmental group says public was denied access to park planning events; Dept. official denies charges; County has 30 days to respond on complaint

By Lynn Anderson
Sun Staff

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Members of an environmental group say that Anne Arundel County officials broke state law when they convened a meeting to discuss the future of Franklin Point beach in a van and prohibited a radio reporter from recording another meeting.

Amanda Spake, president of South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development, said Friday that she e-mailed a letter of complaint to Assistant Attorney General Jack Schwartz, counsel to the state's Open Meetings Compliance Board, on Wednesday.

Schwartz, who confirmed receipt of the e-mail, said that county officials have 30 days to respond. The open meetings board then has another month to produce a ruling.

Spake called officials' actions "egregious."

"They are violating the law all over the place," she said, referring to county officials who convened recent meetings of the Franklin Point and Shady Side Parks Master Planning Committee, a group that includes residents and

environmentalists. The committee is developing a comprehensive parks and recreation plan for five properties in the Shady Side area.

In the complaint, SACReD contends that the county's parks department violated the public meetings law at least three times in recent months. In each instance, county officials are accused of failing to give proper notice about meeting times and dates.

Other alleged violations include a meeting that was held in a van -- state law prohibits public meetings in spaces of limited size -- and an incident in which a reporter with WRYR, a radio station operated by SACReD, was prohibited from tape-recording a meeting.

A county parks official denied breaking state law by blocking public access to the planning meetings. At least three members of the public attended each of the past three meetings of the Franklin Point group, said Jack Keene, chief of planning and construction for the Anne Arundel County Department of Recreation and Parks.

Keene said he had not publicized the three meetings in local newspapers or with fliers because it was too early in the planning process. He said a public meeting would be posted once the committee has formalized a plan for Franklin Point, a 400-acre property near Shady Side, and the other properties.

Accusations denied

As for the van incident, Keene said county officials arranged for members of the committee, as well as several members of the public, to tour the properties in a county vehicle last month. He said it was not a violation of state law because additional county vehicles would have been called into service had more participants showed up for the tour.

Of the third allegation, Keene said the WRYR reporter was prohibited from recording a June 17 meeting because committee members had not been warned ahead of time that the radio station would be broadcasting the meeting at a later date. Keene said he thought it best to run the reporter's request through the county's law office first.

'No secrets'

"We have no secrets to keep," said Keene of the committee's 12 members, including two from the state Department of Natural Resources. State officials helped purchase the Franklin Point property but have left planning up to the county.

In an Aug. 30 letter from the DNR, state officials warned the county not to mow too closely to the shoreline at Franklin Point. In the same letter, state officials advised the county to include a "full spectrum" of participants in the planning process.

The next meeting of the Franklin Point and Shady Side Parks Master Planning Committee will be at 7 p.m. July 15 at Discovery Village in Shady Side.

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