

The Capital

Ehrlich pushes ballfield construction at old Nike site

By DAVID ABRAMS Staff Writer

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. said yesterday that he will try to speed construction of ballfields on an abandoned Nike missile site near the Bay Bridge, even as work on athletic fields continues nearby.

Despite that promise and a battery of criticism from Comptroller William Donald Schaefer, county Recreation and Parks Director Dennis Callahan said he's sticking to the controversial plan to develop fields now on the Anthony G. "Andy" Smith Equestrian Center off College Parkway.

He said the Nike site, which would have two multipurpose fields and one baseball field, won't be ready for five more years, and will cost as much as \$3.8 million.

Mr. Ehrlich, who has no authority over the use of the farm, promised to devote state resources to building ballfields at the old missile site on Bay Head Road.

"I'm not satisfied with the timeframe that has been established in regards to the Nike site from the county. I think we can do it in a more expeditious way," Mr. Ehrlich said after a meeting of the Board of Public Works in Annapolis.

"I may be visiting the site sooner rather than later in any event, but we're trying to work with the county to secure their ultimate goal, obviously, which is more fields for the kids."

The board, which is made up of the governor, comptroller and treasurer and oversees contracts, rejected \$250,000 in bond money for the Smith farm project on Feb. 25. It said the county had reneged on a 1998 deal to use the property solely as an equestrian center.

Construction began anyway last week, opponents filed an emergency hearing to

stop it and a Circuit Court judge sided with the county on Friday. Another hearing is scheduled for March 19.

Mr. Schaefer yesterday blasted Mr. Callahan for making decisions on the Smith farm to improve his rumored bid to succeed County Executive Janet S. Owens in 2006.

"County Executive Callahan' decided he was going to (go forward with construction)," Mr. Schaefer said. "He was going ahead no matter what we did ... He'll get paid when he runs."

Mr. Callahan responded: "Right now, I have the best job in Anne Arundel County, and I must say that e-mails are running about 7-1 in favor (of converting the Smith property), so if that were an election, that's an overwhelming mandate."

But Diane Rey, organizer of the group We Hold Officials Accountable, or WHOA, disputed Mr. Callahan's claims of public support.

"People in our community and across the state are looking to stand up and cheer for government when it can be bipartisan and do the right thing for citizens," she said. "This is possible for Anne Arundel County right now on the Smith Farm. Our community is waiting."

Mr. Callahan said too many steps remain before ballfields can be built on the Cold War missile base.

Two fields have been graded, but the county must wait for federal aid, complete the purchase of the land, remove existing structures on the property and fill up silos with dirt removed from the Smith farm.

Moreover, he said, engineers have not yet determined what might be present underground at the site.

"While I applaud the governor for his statement, he needs to learn a little bit more

about how projects work, because it's going to take at least one year to get the silos filled...," Mr. Callahan said.

"The governor could give us the money today and we couldn't spend any of it for over a year, but I'll be more than willing to hold him to his commitment to give money for that in the future."

Del. Herb McMillan, R-Annapolis, is drafting a bill to earmark the \$250,000 in bond money voted down by the state for the Nike site.

Mr. Callahan wants the money to go toward improvements at Severn-Danza Park instead.

"From my standpoint, this has a lot of elements of just political infighting," Mr. McMillan said.

House Speaker Michael Busch, who works for Mr. Callahan in the county's parks department, said he was bothered that no one at the state ever consulted him or Ms. Owens about alternatives to the Smith property plan.

The Annapolis Democrat said there is a need all over the county for more ballfields, and he would use the bond money, for example, to build a foot-bridge connecting Broadneck Park with the high school across the street and upgrade the school's fields.

The Board of Public Works did approve \$100,000 for a horseback riding therapy program for disabled children yesterday. Mr. Schaefer used the vote to again ridicule Mr. Callahan.

"Ride horses?" he said. "We don't allow horseback riding in Anne Arundel County. Let's not let County Executive Dennis Callahan know about this, or we'll have another horse farm down the tubes."

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