

The Capital

Ballfield work starts at Smith property

By DAVID ABRAMS, Staff Writer

Horses moved out and the bulldozers rolled in this morning as county officials began building athletic fields at a Broadneck Peninsula farm, defying opponents and a state decision to cut off funds.

Construction crews started work at the Anthony G. "Andy" Smith Equestrian Center off College Parkway, a \$2 million project to install a ballfield, a multipurpose field and later trails.

Work starting today will prepare the property for sediment control and grading. The fields, planned to ease a chronic shortage in the area, won't be ready for play until fall 2005, according to a county official.

"That makes me extremely happy, because we are doing what 3,000 kids and their families want done in their community," said Dennis Callahan, county parks and recreation director.

The county has been locked in an acrimonious dispute with Mr. Smith's widow and community groups that want the property to remain a horse farm in his honor.

Elizabeth A. Gleaves sold the 12-acre property to the county for \$500,000 in 1998, and thought she had a deal ensuring that it would be used only as a horse farm. But the sales agreement says the farm is intended to be used "for recreational purposes and as an equestrian center and farm."

Almost three weeks ago, the state Board of Public Works denied \$250,000 in aid for the project in what opponents saw as a moral victory. Comptroller William Donald Schaefer and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. sided with Mrs. Gleaves, saying former county executive John G. Gary Jr. intended

keep the farm as is.

Instead, Mr. Ehrlich said he would try to help the county get money for ballfields on the old Nike missile site nearby.

This morning, the governor's office renewed the offer.

"The governor and the comptroller are willing to dedicate state money to build these ballparks less than two miles away," said Paul Shurick, spokesman for the governor. "Everybody wins under that plan."

Opponents of the county plan for the land said the construction work appeared to be motivated by "spite" on the part of County Executive Janet S. Owens.

"It looks as though the county is thumbing its nose at the state as a result of that Board of Public Works decision," said Diane Rey, organizer of We Hold Officials Accountable, or WHOA.

Del. Herb McMillan, R-Annapolis, said moving forward could jeopardize future state assistance. He estimated that the county could build more than six ballfields at the Nike site with state help.

"My goal is to increase the number of fields in Broadneck in the shortest timeframe possible at the lowest cost to our taxpayers," Mr. McMillan said. "By this standard, the county has made an incredibly poor decision."

Chuck Simpson, a director of the Broadneck Recreation Association, said no new athletic fields have been built in the area since 1986.

A participant in the planning process, Mr. Simpson said the new fields would leave room for the equestrian center. Two more fields are planned at the Nike site.

"We had kids practicing on parking lots last year," Mr. Simpson said.

Mr. Callahan said opposition to the plan to build ballfields on the site amounted to "a few elitist homeowners across the street."

The state's decision means only that the fields won't have lights or an irrigation system, he said.

"Now that it has started," Mr. Callahan said, "let's put the politics behind us and just get the job done for the kids."

dabrams@capitalgazette.com

Published March 03, 2004, [The Capital](#), Annapolis, Md.

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