

The Capital

South County

Hearing scheduled on Franklin Point Park

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

In what could be the final opportunity to shape the future of Franklin Point Park, the Maryland Critical Area Commission will hold a public meeting on the county's master plan for it.

The commission is required to approve plans for the 477-acre state-owned bayfront park that include controversial all-purpose athletic fields, a nature and art center, hiking trails and low-impact access to the water.

But Wednesday's meeting will cover only Critical Area issues, not the need for ballfields.

The meeting isn't required, but there has been so much local interest in the park's future, including a five-page letter from South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development outlining possible Critical Area violations in the plan, that the commission decided to hold a public forum to air all the issues.

"We are really trying to generate a good turnout for this meeting," said SACReD president Amanda Spake.

County parks planning chief Jack Keene said the state Department of Natural Resources, which owns the property and has to approve the plan, has finally done so and recommended some technical changes, such as reducing the size of proposed wildlife viewing platforms. He said DNR did not recommend major changes, like removing proposed ballfields.

He said current approvals will be subject to further review when detailed drawings are submitted.

Mr. Keene said that while the county did not expect the Critical Area Commission would call such a meeting, "We met with (it) on a couple of occasions during the planning process, and I don't think there would be any real surprises for us in what is being presented or in what is needed to be done here."

SACReD, a grassroots group, saved the parkland from development in the 1990s and has since taken a lot of interest in the property in hopes of keeping the environmentally sensitive area in as natural a state as possible.

"The county tried to fast-track this through, but the Critical Area Commission is not fast tracking this anymore," Ms. Spake said. "The regulations say the environmental impact on the Critical Area might be possible if there is no alternative. But the county only has this one plan. They are not looking for alternatives."

She pointed to an idea floated in February by Del. Bob Costa, R-Deale, to look at land surrounding the Sudley Landfill. But the county was not interested in doing a feasibility study of the site.

The Deale-Shady Side Small Area plan noted the park should primarily remain a passive recreation site, but allowed up to 20 percent of the land to be used for more active recreation, like ballfields.

A committee of residents and others was formed two years ago to forge a plan for Franklin Point and four other parks in Shady Side.

Environmentalists urged a plan preserving one of the last large chunks of undeveloped land along the Chesapeake. Parents pleaded for the recreational needs of Shady Side children who have overrun the facilities at soggy, maintenance-challenged Shady Side Park.

The panel voted last May to allow two multipurpose ballfields if no other local site is found.

The 6-4 vote by the Franklin Point-Shady Side Parks Planning Committee was a compromise.

Five commission members will be on hand for the 7 p.m. meeting at Shady Side Elementary School. They'll ask questions and take public comments, then make a recommendation to the full commission when it meets on May 4.

"This is a significant project ... and the commission will be looking at the environmental impact of all proposed activities as it relates to Critical Area regulations," said Ren Serey, executive director of the commission.

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