

The Capital

South County

County backing off deal to take over 477 acres for park

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The county is backing out of the five-year-old deal to take over Franklin Point Park in south county after the state said it could not build ballfields or parking lots on wetlands at the site.

County parks Director Dennis Callahan, in a Wednesday letter to Department of Natural Resources Secretary C. Ronald Franks said the state had imposed conditions "which substantially reduce the number of park activities available to the Shady Side community and the public."

Therefore, after spending \$3 million on the property and \$100,000 on an exhaustive public planning process to set the future course of the 477-acre property saved from development six years ago, the county won't take title to the park. It will terminate the agreements currently in force by June 30.

Mr. Callahan agreed the decision not to allow ballfields and parking on wetlands was the last straw. "It is our interpretation that nothing can be done on the property," he said. "They over stepped their bounds."

County Executive Janet S. Owens said she was not sorry the county invested the money in the project, but she was sorry the active use needs, namely ballfields, sorely needed in south county could not be met.

"It is very disappointing. You would think after all the time, money, and effort, that some kind of accommodation could have been reached short of intervention by the Critical Areas Commission," she said.

"We will have a passive park," she said. "The DNR is good at managing those kinds of parks, so let them."

After the environmentally sensitive land abutting the bay and two wetland creeks was saved by local activists the state and county struck a deal to split the \$5 million cost of the property. Under the plan, the DNR would retain the deed until the county completed a comprehensive master plan for the park. That plan was finalized last spring.

Since then the DNR and other agencies have been reviewing the plan for final approval.

On May 4 the state Critical Areas Commission ruled on a number of conditions and recommendations for the park, including outlawing parking and ballfields on wetlands. The Critical Area Commission decisions were to become part of the transfer deal

between DNR and the county.

The state will retain the property but does not know what it will do with the property. DNR spokesman Heather Lynch said late yesterday the department had still not received the letter from the county.

"But we look forward to working with them in the future to guide the future use of the park," she said.

Reaction mixed

The news was a victory for some and a disappointment for residents of the area.

Members of South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development, the grassroots organization that saved Franklin Point from development in the first place, were sorry to see the county give up, but hopeful the DNR would help make it a natural park like Jug Bay Wetlands.

"The Owens administration thinks that big parcels like this are only good if you can develop something on it," said Jackie Savitz, an environmental scientist on the board of SACReD. "For us this unique property is valuable to us if you develop it or not. "

But it is more valuable to the environment of the Chesapeake Bay if it is undeveloped, she said.

The organization looks forward to working with DNR to maintaining Franklin Point as a natural area, Ms. Savitz said. "That is what the community wanted in the first place."

Pete Medhurst, president of the 600-child strong sports league in Shady Side, said there is still a need for more space for area teams to play baseball, soccer and football. But he was supportive of the Critical Area Commission conclusion.

"We are disappointed," he said. "But at the same time, we don't need to disturb that land, if people who know more about it than we do deem it would be (harmful). There will be another place ... Someone has to come up with something."

He suggested the county might spend some of the \$100,000 earmarked for a parking lot at Franklin Point to maintain the fields they already have. "Even half of that would help."

Since the park's master plan was approved area residents have searched for alternative sites for all-purpose fields. The master plan stated the planned ballfields would be built only if no other suitable site could be found, and the DNR underscored that requirement in its proposed deal with the county.

Del. Bob Costa, R-Deale, pitched the idea to look at the 166-acre Sudley landfill, and thought he could find matching funds to pay for a feasibility study, but the county was not interested.

"We will continue to work with Recreation and Parks to find adequate sports facilities for

south county," he said. "Even if the ballfields at Franklin Point had gone through, we still need baseball fields down here."

Lately the owners of a parcel outside Deale, that is currently used to grow sod, have talked to county officials about leasing the land for ball fields.

Mr. Callahan said the county would love to have that land for athletic facilities and is awaiting a call back from the property owners.

A local church is also said to be looking for land on which to build ballfields and basketball courts.

Blame Game

Mr. Callahan says SACReD, which sought to quash the ball fields, caused the ruination of the park plan.

"The Critical Area Commission allowed itself to be intimidated by this local group," he said. He also recalled the old charge, used during the debate over a proposed Safeway in Deale, that residents in the area who supported the fields had been intimidated into silence.

Critical Area Commission Executive Director Ren Serey said he had not seen the county's letter to DNR. But he did say, "the commission believes the process it went through to review the park proposal was appropriate, and the decision it made was the right decision."

Blaming SACReD is ironic because its efforts 10 years ago saved the property in the first place. In fact members of the organization were dragged into court by the proposed developer, Dominic Antonelli, who sought millions of dollars in damages. SACReD prevailed in court and the state and county agreed to save the land.

"That is the only good news, the property is preserved," Ms. Owens said.

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