

# The Capital

## **Our say: Shady Side park belatedly reaches a turning point**

By THE CAPITAL EDITORIAL BOARD

THE DECISION to not use 477 acres at Franklin Point for a housing development was the outcome of a huge planning battle of the 1990s - one in which local activists prevailed over a developer who took them to court.

But that battle wasn't the whole war. Once the state and the county had agreed to take over the land, next on the agenda was exactly what to do with Franklin Point Park. Should it be kept nearly pristine, or should part of it - a very small part, roughly 6 percent - be used for ballfields and other recreational facilities?

We apparently have an answer on that now, courtesy of the state Critical Area Commission and the county. It's an answer we're not going to quarrel with - as it puts preservation of wetlands first, and that has to be of paramount importance on environmentally sensitive land adjoining the bay.

But we do wonder about a planning process that required years of effort - and about \$100,000 - in order to circle back to its starting point.

The state Critical Area Commission, after going over the county's master plan for the park, has ruled that the county cannot put ballfields or parking areas on wetlands at the site. And this, in essence, has made county officials throw up their hands and tell the state Department of Natural Resources: OK, if we can't do anything on that land - you can keep it.

So the county is backing out of its five-year-old deal to take over the park. Commented County Executive Janet Owens: "We will have a passive park. The DNR is good at managing those kinds of park, so let them." Her parks and recreation chief, Dennis Callahan, said "the Critical Area Commission allowed itself to be intimidated by this local group" - namely, South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development, which took the lead in saving Franklin Point in the first place, and since then has criticized plans for ballfields.

We hope that's not true. That state commission should be able to make its own decisions about what land can be developed and what cannot, irrespective of how many witnesses SACReD lines up for hearings. At any rate, the park's master plan stated that the ballfields would not be built there unless no other suitable site for them could be found. That search for alternatives must now continue and intensify - the area is critically short of places for youth teams to play. And suitable locations aren't easy to come by on the Shady Side

Peninsula, much of which consists of Critical Areas.

We regret that no way could be found to make Franklin Point Park satisfy both needs - for recreational facilities, and for a large piece of land on the bay to be kept in a nearly pristine state. But if no balance can be struck and a choice has to be made, we have to come down in favor of environmental preservation.

Still, wasn't there any way to get this crucial decision made at an earlier stage of the process, before so much time and energy was diverted into planning and debating unbuildable ballfields?

*Published May 24, 2005, The Capital, Annapolis, Md.  
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