

The Capital

Top Stories

Deale Safeway site to be a community center?

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

If plans by four Methodist churches work out, south county might be blessed with a new community center in Deale where Safeway once wanted to build a controversial shopping center.

Cedar Grove, Franklin, Centenary and St. Matthew's United Methodist churches have banded together to form South County Community Development, a nonprofit corporation that would operate the center at the intersection of Routes 256 and 258.

Cedar Grove parishioners are leading the effort to buy the 15-acre property from Safeway, and the corporation would run the center, according to Jordan Matejceck, who's spearheading Cedar Grove's effort.

"The family life center will be a place for all residents to come, a place where we can build and celebrate community," Mr. Matejceck said. "We want to build a place for all the people of south county, which is now under-served."

Negotiations have been under way for a few months, and Mr. Matejceck said a deal could be reached in the next few weeks. Safeway spokesman Greg TenEyck declined to comment on a possible sale.

"I can confirm there are negotiations under way right now. Nothing has been settled, so we have no further comment," he said.

The Deale churches are modeling their effort after one by a group of churches in Severna Park, which under the leadership of Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church created the Community Center in the 1990s. It provides a swimming pool and space for youth activities, meetings and a coffeehouse.

Plans for the center in Deale include a pool and gym space with a stage for a variety of activities. It might include a larger kitchen and bathrooms that could be used in emergencies, like Tropical Storm Isabel.

Mr. Matejceck said the project could cost close to \$8 million. The land would account for about \$2.5 million of that total, though negotiations continue.

"As soon as we know where we are on the property we will start a big campaign (to raise funds)," he said. "For this to happen we need community involvement. Cedar Grove can't fund this whole thing. We are looking for sponsors to help."

The community currently uses space at schools and churches, such as Cedar Grove, for meetings. There's a small indoor community center north of Owensville that meets some,

but far from all, of the recreational needs for south county's growing population.

The closest indoor swimming pool is the county's Arundel Olympic Swim Center near Annapolis. The county will open its second swim center in Brooklyn Park this fall.

All of the plans depend not only on successful negotiations with Safeway, but also on whether the land can support a center.

"Can we build it from a technical point of view - wetlands, stormwater management and those sorts of things?" Mr. Matejcek said.

Safeway jumped through all sorts of hoops regarding stormwater management before the county finally approved its plan to build a 77,000-square-foot store and shopping center at the site. The plan was ultimately scuttled in 2001 by public opposition to a commercial center in a rural corner of the county.

Community leaders have called for a facility like the one the churches have proposed. Small Area Plan committees for Deale/Shady Side and South County noted such a need in their reports. Subsequent surveys of recreational needs pointed to a desire for indoor basketball or swimming facilities.

Del. Bob Costa, R-Deale, has met with the group and offered some advice.

"I support the whole concept because there is a dramatic need for a center down here," he said. "Especially for basketball, there are hundreds of kids fighting for space to play and practice."

He also said he thinks a facility could help to unite the community.

"I think that would be a fitting end to the saga of that property," Mr. Costa said. "It would be a community benefit that everyone wants to see."

Published July 21, 2006, The Capital, Annapolis, Md.

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