

The Capital

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County reverses on Shady Side plan

By E.B. FURGURSON III Staff Writer

Change could clear way for 29 homes. County planners have done an about face on a primary concern surrounding an environmentally sensitive Shady Side housing project nearly 10 years in the making.

Four years after it required Sturbridge Homes of Gambrills to provide a second entrance to its planned 29-home subdivision on the West River, the county quietly reversed its position on the Holder property. The decision clears a major hurdle for the project and raises questions among local residents who have been fighting the plan for years.

"We are very concerned about this flip-flop at the ninth hour, without an explanation," said Linda Andreason, who lives down the road from the site.

Betty Dixon, county land use and environment coordinator, wrote in an e-mail that after careful evaluation of the project, the Office of Planning and Zoning decided the project could proceed without the second link to Scott Town Road.

"Since there was no requirement in the code that stated a secondary connection would have to be made, there was no basis to require it," Mrs. Dixon said. "Further review by planning and zoning at final (review) determined that the connection did not have to be made."

Neither Ms. Dixon nor other officials with planning and zoning would explain the decision in any detail. Officials with Sturbridge Homes also were unavailable for comment.

Development of the 111-acre property has long been a contentious community issue because the land serves as a valuable buffer to the West River. More than 77 acres are in the Critical Area, with 51 acres designated the most sensitive Resource Conservation Area.

The development plan has been under review since 2002, when the county sent the plan back to Sturbridge Homes for a variety of issues. The initial plan submitted called for 36 homes, the county said it would have to be trimmed.

The road being planned for the cluster of homes would have to cross both flood plains and wetlands. Approval from the Army Corps of Engineers and Maryland Department of the Environment is still pending.

The project was vested by the school system a year after it was submitted, with students slated to attend Shady Side Elementary. That school has since reached its maximum capacity.

"How is that responsible development?" said V.K. Holtzendorf, who lives across West River Road from the project.

She and other area residents recently formed Citizens Saving West River Farms, concerned about school overcrowding, the environment and traffic impacts. The organization is planning a public meeting next month.

County documents show the project won its sketch phase approval in June 2004, with the requirement the "proposed connection through to Scott Town Road shall be established."

Officials first pushed the road to minimize traffic on West River Road and to avoid creating yet another dead end that can create undo hazards during emergency response. There are also apparently some wetland issues near that road extension.

As of Jan. 18 the road was still required, but a week later county officials changed their mind.

An internal memo a week later said "based on in-house discussions and further evaluation of existing topographical conditions, the extension ... is no longer an issue."

The memo does not explain the change. And county planners would not say why it changed its position.

"It was simply eliminated, with no public input," Ms. Holtzendorf said.

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