

The Capital

Environmental woes at center of Riverdale hearing

Concerns continue for Two Run Branch

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Residents and conservationists last week decried the potential environmental effects if Riverdale Baptist Church builds its controversial school campus in deep south county.

The main concern is degradation of Two Run Branch, a prime tributary feeding the prized Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary across the road from the proposed site off Wrighton Road, south of Waysons Corner.

"All we need is one good disaster crashing through the wetlands, running down Two Run Branch ... the wildlife, the sensitive animals ... are gone and will never be replaced," Bonnie Sudnick, of Bristol, said at a Maryland Department of Environment hearing Wednesday night. "One good disaster - it could happen this weekend with this storm coming in."

The subject of the meeting, specifically, was Riverdale's plan to cross a section of Two Run Branch in order to access its mostly wooded 57-acre property. A permit is required from the Maryland Department of the Environment to do so because the entry road would permanently impact 12,125 square feet of wetlands, 5,460 square feet of wetland buffer and 130 linear feet of the stream itself.

The proposed entry is virtually the same as Riverdale initially planned when it began the site approval process seven years ago. But the county rejected that plan because of the wetlands and the fact there was another entry, a shared right of way, off Pindell Road on the other side of the property.

A plan was finally approved but then rejected, first by the county Board of Appeals in late 2004 and later by Maryland courts, including the Court of Appeals. The church then sued the county under a religious discrimination statute, an action still hanging over the county as it processes the development application.

The school facilities, which have grown since the original plan in 2004, would likely consist of two buildings not to exceed 40,000 square feet each, a third building to house a cafeteria and classrooms, parking, athletic fields and the road to serve it all.

Representatives from the engineering firm that put the plan together, Wilkerson and Associates, briefly presented an outline of the current plan to cross the creek and wetlands, then sat back as one project opponent after another spoke about potential problems with the plan.

The school and three residential lots Riverdale is attempting to carve out of the northern part of the parcel nearest the wetland crossing will occupy much of the property that is not designated as wetlands or forest conservation area.

Aside from the crossing, it is the cumulative impact of all the associated development - buildings, roadway, parking lots, basketball courts and ballfields - that meeting-goers pointed to as cause for concern.

Impervious surfaces where woods and farm fields now stand will increase runoff into the creek and wetlands, harming the sensitive Jug Bay Wetlands, designated and protected as one of a handful of National Estuarine Research Reserves in the country, opponents argued.

"Two Run Branch is a cold-water stream, very rare in the Coastal Plain," said Jeff Shenot, who was speaking as a board member of the Friends of Jug Bay but is a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientist by day. "There are some, but none have the diversity of Two Run Branch. There are two species of salamander not found anywhere else."

Plus other fauna and flora, he noted.

He said the impact of runoff, and particularly thermal pollution that would raise the temperature of the water downstream, could have devastating effects on species that flourish in the cooler habitat.

Shenot also noted the impact a large school with an estimated 400 students would have on the local water table, both in withdrawing water and putting it back into the ground via septic systems.

"They will be withdrawing a lot, but also discharging a lot," he said. "What about the hydrologic connection?"

The permit plan being reviewed by MDE also calls for the wetlands that will be disturbed to be mitigated off-site. When wetlands are disturbed they have to be re-created, either on-site at a 1-to-1 ratio or off-site at a 2-to-1 ratio.

Shenot and others testifying took that notion to task.

"Whether it is 2-to-1 or 200-to-1, it's not doing Two Run Branch any good off-site," Shenot said.

He and others insisted that the project should be held to a very stiff standard because it is so close to the Jug Bay preserve, a 1,600-acre swath of land protected with millions of federal, state and county funds over the years.

Both the Lothian and Bristol civic associations stood to oppose the project on environmental and other grounds.

There also were questions about the plan submitted. The MDE announcement for the hearing notes the permit is needed for the school project, but the plan currently before the county is for the three residential parcels at the north end of the property.

The reason for that is the proposed school facility is not a permitted use under current county laws, which restrict construction along historic and scenic roads and nonarterial roadways.

"I can't understand why we are even discussing this again," said Rene Smit, who owns a property that shares the right of way road Riverdale would have used to access the property under its previous plan.

Part of Riverdale's lawsuit against the county, and a subsequent settlement since turned down by the County Council, sought to remove those restrictions.

MDE is scheduled to hand down a decision 30 days after the public comment period closes Sept. 2.

Those who wish to comment by letter in the next two weeks can write the Water Management Administration, Nontidal Wetlands and Waterways Division, 1800 Washington Blvd., Suite 430, Baltimore, MD 21230. Include the permit number, 08-NT-0095/200861109, on your correspondence.

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