

The Capital

Top Stories

Water scarce, growth plentiful

Dry west county is saturated with new developments

By JOSHUA STEWART, Staff Writer

When Ray Smallwood walks across the lawn of his Maryland City home, he doesn't like what he hears.

"You go out there now and it sounds like Rice Krispies when you walk across your grass," said Mr. Smallwood, president of the Maryland City Civic Association. "It's that crunchy."

That snap, crackle and pop is the sound of a water shortage - one that has nothing to do with rain like the scattered showers falling around the county today.

Mr. Smallwood and most people in west county have been on some type of water restriction since May 3 because of a water main problem along the Baltimore County line. Having to buy water from other jurisdictions worries the longtime civic leader and others as a wave of new developments looms over their part of the county.

"They say they want to increase construction, but they don't have the water infrastructure to do it," Mr. Smallwood said.

A new mixed-use development in Maryland City along Route 198, Arundel Gateway, plans to provide a high-end grocery store, retail space, upscale shops, 1,600 homes, restaurants and office space. Ringing in at \$500 million, construction won't begin until 2008, with the first homes opening in 2010 at the earliest.

Representatives from the developer, Ribera, couldn't be reached for comment.

Parkside, in Jessup, and Arundel Mills Corporate and Arundel Preserve, both in Hanover, are just a few of the other massive developments in the pipeline in areas bound by water restrictions.

According to information from the county Land Use Office, the water limitations began May 3 when water piped into the county from Baltimore was shut off.

Anne Arundel County draws most of the water for its system from its own wells, but supplements its supply with an outside line from Baltimore County and another from Baltimore city, said Pam Jordan, Anne Arundel's public works spokesman.

During a January inspection, Baltimore County found that the 54-inch water main that supplies Anne Arundel County with water was deteriorating and repairs would take up to a year to complete.

So on May 3, 10 communities designated by ZIP codes in west and north county were placed on water restrictions and three others were asked to voluntarily limit their water use.

From 5 p.m. to midnight Monday through Thursday, and around the clock from 5 p.m. Friday through midnight Sunday and all holidays, people couldn't water their lawns, wash their vehicles at their house, wash outdoor surfaces or top off pools.

The restrictions were instituted to coincide with peak water-use times to reserve water for emergency services, drinking and other indoor uses, Ms. Jordan said.

A break at the Maryland Correctional Facility in Jessup and another along Marley Neck Boulevard in June and late July tightened water use even more.

A ban on all outdoor water use around the clock, including watering lawns and plants, use of charcoal or gas grills or washing vehicles anywhere, was imposed.

The problems forced the county to divert water from one place to another to make sure every area at least had some access, Ms. Jordan said.

Once broken mains were repaired, the restriction reverted to the May 3 standards on Aug. 4. The more relaxed restrictions are in effect until Oct. 1, when water use traditionally slows down, Ms. Jordan said.

"They have had their fair share of water restrictions over the summer," she said.

The restrictions make some nervous.

"This Ribera development that they have out there - it would be good to have upscale developments and nice restaurants, but if they have a water main break, oh boy, we are in trouble," said Tim Reyburn, president of the Russett Community Association.

"If you are going to build, build, build, build, tell me where you are going to get the water, water, water, water," Mr. Smallwood said.

Before developments are approved, the county considers the water available in the area. It's one of the key elements in an application review, Ms. Jordan said.

With the current water issues, and more development pending, water system improvements are under way.

New lines will allow the county to divert water more easily from one area to another if there's a problem, Ms. Jordan said.

"If we had to redirect water, these extra lines would do that," she said.

In addition to the new lines, a temporary above-ground pipe was activated early this month to compensate for the out-of-service Baltimore County supply, Ms. Jordan said.

In the meantime, things in west county are brown.

"If you have annuals and a newly planted tree, it is pretty much toast," Mr. Reyburn said. "It's kind of a bummer for people."

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