

The Capital

South County

Church purchases Safeway property : Corporation will create community center there

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

Four South County churches have joined forces to create a community center on the controversial Safeway property in Deale.

Cedar Grove United Methodist Church announced Sunday that it has signed a deal to buy the 16-acre property at the intersection of Routes 256 and 258, where Safeway once tried to build a strip mall and grocery store.

Once built, the facility will be leased to the nonprofit South County Community Development Corp., consisting of four United Methodist churches: Cedar Grove, Centenary and St. Matthew's United Methodist in Shady Side, and Franklin United Methodist in Churchton.

The vision for the South County Family Life Center includes providing a sports outlet for youths, including a gymnasium, plus a conference room and other community amenities, and maybe a pool to boot.

But turning that vision into reality will take a lot of effort, and money. The land deal is in the neighborhood of \$2.5 million, and the initial phase of the project is likely to cost another \$8 million.

"Our biggest focus now is to raise sufficient funds to finance this plan; otherwise we simply will not be able to move forward," said Ingrid Quimby, interim executive director of the SCCDC, said. "This is not for any one church or any one organization, it is what the community wants - and needs."

Youth basketball teams, for instance sometimes have to hold practice at 9 p.m. or later, for lack of gym space in south county, Ms. Quimby said.

"There are not a lot of recreational facilities in the area. Parents need to know their kids can be going somewhere and doing something safe. It can also be a gathering place for families, seniors. The people are behind this."

But now folks have to walk the walk, she added.

"We received an overwhelming amount of support from the community at large when we first discussed our vision ... We will build whatever the community is able to deliver."

Jordan Matejcek, Cedar Grove member and project director for the center, was happy to see it move to this next phase.

"Now that the lawyers have given their approval, we have moved into our due-diligence period," he said. The contract allows a six-month period for the church to measure whether the project is feasible - if facility can be built on the site and whether there's enough community support to pull it off.

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.

The pool is a secondary wish at this point, Ms. Quimby said. "Our primary goal is clearly a multi-purpose gymnasium, a large space for a variety of activities."

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.

In the battle over the proposed Safeway, the primary group leading the fight against the strip mall and grocery store was South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development.

The group thinks the latest news is yet another victory for the community.

"SACReD is very excited about this project," said Don Avery, president of the organization. "This proposed use of the property is why we fought so hard to prevent the strip mall development. It fulfills a need envisioned by the Small Area Plan and is the type of development that unites communities."

He said SACReD looks forward to working with the church group to build an environmentally sound development.

South County Community Development is modeling the facility after one in Severna Park operated by Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church. A community center for youth activities, meetings, a coffeehouse and a swimming pool grew out of the financially troubled YMCA the church bought in the 1990s.

But all that will take a yeoman's effort by the community at large.

"This project is bigger than Cedar Grove Church. We cannot do it alone," Mr. Matejcek said. "For it to be successful we need the whole community - government, businesses and individuals - to support this effort with their voices, ideas, resources and dollars."

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