

The Capital

Top Stories

Buy it now! Owens effigy can be yours for a price

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

With less than three weeks left until Christmas, people panic trying to find the right gift for that special someone who has everything.

Problem solved.

Starting tonight, online shoppers can buy their very own county executive.

South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development is selling its 12-foot-tall papier-mache likeness of Janet S. Owens, whom they've crowned the "Queen of Sprawl," to the highest bidder on eBay.

"People say she couldn't be bought ... but here's your proof. The Queen of Sprawl, available to the highest bidder ... she's yours for a price," says the tongue-in-cheek, double-entendre-laden copy accompanying the posted sales notice.

The effigy, wearing a sash and crown, caused quite a stir a few years ago. It made three appearances in south county in 2000 during the dust up over Safeway's later-scuttled plans to build a store and shopping center in Deale.

The street-theater prop showed up at a small picket line on the site and during a quick march over the Rockhold Creek bridge. At a public meeting, it danced to the tune of Joni Mitchell's 1970s lyrics "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

The puppetry incensed the county executive and her inner circle. They thought the Queen of Sprawl moniker was a cheap shot and disrespectful to boot.

Ms. Owens has not softened her position since. Hearing of the impending auction, she said she did not find anything humorous about it.

"I find it appalling and disgusting," she said yesterday. "Those folks don't know a thing about civility. It's unbelievable. It's amazing what levels those folks will go to. I am sure they only intended harm. That is all I have to say on this sorry state of affairs."

Five years ago, Ms. Owens defended her record on development in south county,



The puppet likeness of County Executive Janet Owens, dubbed the 'Queen of Sprawl,' was used by opponents of a planned Safeway in Deale.

pointing to the county's plan to buy 477-acre Franklin Point as an environmental preserve.

"Given Franklin Point, to accuse me as the queen of sprawl is ironic and incorrect," Ms. Owens said then. "Street theater doesn't work for public policy."

The county has since backed out of the deal with the state to manage and take over the property after it was told that it couldn't create ballfields on wetlands at the site.

The effigy was made by activist-artist Nadine Bloch, who has made puppets for scores of demonstrations around the country.

"Life-size images are quite effective to bring home messages on issues, particularly one like sprawl," Ms. Bloch said from her studio in Takoma Park. "It's an issue so big that it turns people off from thinking about it."

She said putting it into a form like a larger-than-life puppet helps people focus.

"A sense of humor makes it more accessible," she said.

Most of Ms. Bloch's political puppets are noted for their enlarged caricature heads, and the Queen of Sprawl is no different.

The papier-mache head has Ms. Owens' tell-tale eyeglasses painted on. Strips of foam rubber were fashioned to suggest her trademark coiffure, topped with a golden crown emblazoned "Queen of Sprawl."

The body of the puppet is merely a wooden frame draped in light fabric under which a puppeteer can hide while carrying the thing aloft.

Since its last appearance the puppet has been stored in a two-story garage in south county. "She has been kept in pristine shape and is available to anyone - friend or foe," said SACReD board member Mike Shay.

"Maybe someone might want to buy her to use in a protest during the last year of her administration," he said. "Maybe one of her friends might buy her to prevent that. Even a developer could buy her."

Or Ms. Owens herself could change the puppet's moniker and use it in a future campaign. Her term as county executive ends next year, and she's considering a run for Congress.

Bids, starting at \$250, will be taken until Dec. 18. All proceeds will go to the nonprofit environmental group.



Capital file photo

To make access to this auction on eBay easier, the Web site of SACReD's radio station, www.wryr.org, will have a direct link to the puppet bidding site.

*Published December 07, 2005, The Capital, Annapolis, Md.
Copyright © 2005 The Capital, Annapolis, Md.*