



School plans dealt a blow

Council vote to limit building on rural roads threatens expansion

By Phillip McGowan

Sun reporter

Originally published February 8, 2006

Plans to build a religious school in Lothian were dealt a serious blow when the Anne Arundel County Council passed a measure this week that severely limits development along nearly two dozen rural roads in the southern half of the county. County Council Chairman Edward R. Reilly, a Crofton Republican who represents South County, proposed designating 23 roads from Davidsonville to Bristol as scenic and historic to keep schools, country clubs, landfills and other facilities from being built in adjacent rural-agricultural districts.

Among the roads covered by the bill is one that provides access to County Executive Janet S. Owens' South County farm.

Reilly said he believes the bill, passed 6-1 on Monday night, will help preserve the rural integrity of South County and maintain safety by discouraging traffic along the narrow, winding paths that were designed for wagons and carriages, not dump trucks and sport utility vehicles.

"We are putting more restrictions on the people down there," Reilly said at the meeting. "If I am criticized for making South County more rural, bring it on."

The decision throws into jeopardy the future of Arundel Bay Christian Academy in Lothian. School officials have sought permits for nearly four years to construct a 31,000-square-foot school at Wrighton and Pindell roads. Both Wrighton and Pindell were included on the list of scenic and historic roads.

County Planning Director Joseph W. Rutter Jr. testified Monday night that permits for the project must be obtained and visible construction must be under way by the time the bill is enacted, within 45 days. County officials and representatives of the project said that's not enough time for the church to begin construction. The bill did not include a clause "grandfathering" projects that are in the permitting process.

What's more: The school's lease on its current facility, located two miles south on Lower Pindell Road, is about to expire.

There are 175 students enrolled in Arundel Bay from preschool through eighth grade, according to the school's Web site.

Michael G. Leahy, an attorney representing the school, which is owned by Riverdale Baptist Church in Upper Marlboro, said yesterday that he was "shocked that the council passed this bill on such a short fuse, given there was significant testimony that there were problems with it."

Leahy said his clients are weighing their next move.

"We're not going away," he said.

County planning officials told the council that no active businesses would be affected by the legislation, which has Owens' support.

Upper Pindell Road provides access to Owens' family farm.

Owens said yesterday that she played no part in which roads were selected. But she said Upper Pindell Road was a legitimate candidate, noting the 100-year-old cedar trees that line stretches of the narrow road, making two-lane driving difficult.

"If it wasn't on [the list], it would be suspicious because the road is so narrow," said Owens, who has fought to protect farmland in South County.

Reilly said Monday that the basis of the selection was the small area plan, developed six years ago by residents, along with a 1997 council resolution that drew upon a county commission's recommendations to designate certain roads as scenic and historic.

Rutter and county attorney Linda Schuett developed the map of selected roads with the aim of meeting legal requirements, Reilly said.

County Councilwoman Barbara D. Samorajczyk, an Annapolis-area Democrat, criticized the limited scope of the bill, saying that the legislation should apply to all roads deemed scenic and historic throughout the county. She voted against the measure.

Reilly has pushed throughout his first term to help maintain South County's rural nature. He said that the vast majority of his constituents want to keep development out. He, along with Rutter, encouraged other council members to propose similar legislation for their districts.

Reilly withdrew a bill in 2004 that would have kept private schools - Arundel Bay and two others - from building on neighborhood roads, and supporters of Arundel Bay accused him of targeting the school.

The council chairman said he supports the building of schools, but only in areas that have adequate infrastructure to accommodate the congestion.

"We want schools in South County, but not in those particular areas," Reilly said of the designated roads. "It just makes sense to have adequate roads [to handle the] planned traffic. ... It's smart development."

Copyright © 2006, The Baltimore Sun