

Ball field building at farm site begins despite opposition

\$2 million project starts while neighbors object, state withholds funds

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Construction is beginning on ball fields at the former Smith farm on the Broadneck Peninsula despite continuing objections from neighbors and activists who say the land was intended solely for an equestrian center.

Work started this week on the \$2 million project, which was delayed last month when the state Board of Public Works voted not to give Anne Arundel County \$250,000 in bond money for the ball fields.

County parks officials said that the loss of that money means the fields will not have lights or underground irrigation, but that they never considered abandoning the project.

"The overwhelming majority of people in the Broadneck area want those fields, and we're delivering on that," said Dennis M. Callahan, director of parks and recreation for the county.

State Comptroller William Donald Schaefer and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. voted against giving the \$250,000 in bond money. Both said they believed the former owner of the farm, Elizabeth Gleaves, sold her land to the county with the understanding that it would be used only for equestrian activities.

Ehrlich offered to help the county find alternative sites and funding for athletic fields on the Broadneck Peninsula. But Callahan said building the fields on the Smith property was the County Council's choice and would be the quickest way to meet the demand for playing space in the area.

Activists who oppose the ball fields said the county's decision to proceed amounts to open defiance of the governor and comptroller.

"The state sent a clear message that this project was wrong," said Diane Rey, spokeswoman for We Hold Officials Accountable!, an [Annapolis](#)-based group that has opposed the county's plans at the former Smith farm. "It's not like there's a lot of extra money around to go to wrongheaded projects like this one."

Many critics

Del. Herbert H. McMillan, an [Annapolis](#) Republican, also criticized the county's actions, saying the parks department should shift its plans for athletic fields to the nearby Nike Site.

"Governor Ehrlich and Comptroller Schaefer generously offered to help the county fund construction of ball fields at the Nike Site this year," McMillan said in a statement. "Anne Arundel County's contemptuous dismissal of their legitimate concerns regarding the Smith Farm is short-sighted and ill-advised. ... The Anne Arundel County administration should be working with Governor Ehrlich and Comptroller Schaefer, not picking fights with them.

But Callahan said the work at the Smith property has nothing to do with the governor or comptroller. "This department never allows politics to stand in the way of what the children of a community need," he said.

Callahan said the County Council voted unanimously to build ball fields at the park. He said the fields probably would be open by spring of next year.

The bitter dispute over the property has lasted several years.

A bargain price

Gleaves has said she sold the property below market value - \$500,000 - because former County Executive John G. Gary promised in 1998 that it would be used only for an equestrian center.

The county built an equestrian center at the site, but left space for other recreational uses. Callahan and County Executive Janet S. Owens have maintained that the purchase agreement for the property always allowed the land to be used for ball fields.

"We will not only have horses frolicking, but we'll have children playing behind them," Callahan said. "That's probably the best combination we could have."

Rey said yesterday that the county was being spiteful by moving forward with construction.

"The county is doing this because it can," she said.

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