

Compromise made on use of Anne Arundel Co. land

Land sold for horse center will have one ball field

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Originally published March 25, 2004

Three years of controversy surrounding a 12-acre horse farm on the Broadneck Peninsula ended yesterday when Anne Arundel County officials and the former owner of the farm reached a settlement under which the county will build one, instead of two, ball fields at the property.

Former owner Elizabeth Smith Gleaves sued the county to prevent construction of ball fields at the farm. She said county leaders had promised her the property would be used only for equestrian activities when she sold it to them in 1998. Her cause gained statewide attention last month when Comptroller William Donald Schaefer and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. criticized the county's handling of the property.

"Everybody here wins," Gleaves said after her attorneys reached the agreement. "There were no defeats here today."

County leaders said they also were pleased with the settlement.

"This compromise will finally end this nearly three-year ordeal," said County Executive Janet S. Owens in a statement. "There remains a desperate need for more recreation fields on the Broadneck Peninsula, but hopefully this plan will help us move forward. I remain confident that both athletic fields and an equestrian center can co-exist on that site."

Under the settlement, the county will build a multi-purpose ball field on the corner of the property abutting College Parkway and the existing Broadneck Park. But the county will be required to replace fencing it has removed, repair damage created by the grading it began last month and remove existing sediment ponds within a year.

The Noah's Ark Wildlife Center will be allowed to continue leasing space on the property, but if the center moves elsewhere, the space it occupies would revert to equestrian use.

Though Gleaves and community activists originally demanded that the entire property be devoted to equestrian activities, they said yesterday that they can live with the compromise.

"If Mrs. Gleaves is satisfied, then I have to believe that justice is done," said Diane Rey, spokeswoman for We Hold Officials Accountable!, an Annapolis-based group that has supported Gleaves' battle against the county. Rey called the settlement "a very fair

compromise."

The battle over the farm's fate has galvanized county parks officials, recreation advocates, Broadneck community activists and even state leaders over the last few months.

Gleaves has said she sold the property for \$500,000 - below market value - 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. In 2001, the County Council voted to put ball fields on the property.

Despite criticism from Gleaves and community groups, Owens and county parks director Dennis Callahan maintained that the purchase agreement for the property had allowed the land to be used for ball fields.

"It was astounding to me that they would put their own political motives above what the county had agreed to contractually," Gleaves said yesterday, reflecting on the years of conflict.

Last month, with bulldozers about to roll onto the property, Ehrlich and Schaefer endorsed Gleaves' position and denied the county \$250,000 in state money to help build the ball fields. Schaefer called the county's handling of the situation an example of why people don't trust government.

Days later, protesters stood in front of the bulldozers that were beginning grading work.

County officials maintained a steady counterattack, saying a combination of horse barns and ball fields would be the best solution for the Broadneck community.

Gleaves filed her suit in Anne Arundel County Circuit Court on March 5. A preliminary injunction hearing that could have led to a stoppage of work at the farm began Friday. The hearing was scheduled to resume yesterday but didn't because attorneys were working on the settlement.

Cary J. Hansel, Gleaves' Greenbelt-based attorney, said county officials had been unwilling to discuss concessions until after Friday's court proceedings. "I think they realized the hearing was going well for Mrs. Gleaves," he said. Hansel said he was thrilled with the settlement.

"This was a win for Mrs. Gleaves and a win for the community," he said.

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