

County ends deal to build ball fields

State panel bans such facilities over wetlands at Franklin Point; Park to remain under state control

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May 27, 2005

The future of Shady Side's 477-acre Franklin Point Park is unclear after Anne Arundel County officials pulled out of a longstanding deal to build ball fields on the land.

The county pulled out of the deal after the state Critical Area Commission ruled this month that ball fields, parking lots and trails could not be built over wetlands. The park fronts the Chesapeake Bay and features about 271 acres protected by Critical Area laws, which restrict building on environmentally sensitive coastal land.

"This decision just lays in motion more endlessly complicated issues," said County Executive Janet S. Owens. "My bottom line is, we preserved the property. ... I'm just disappointed it won't have more of a mix of uses."

In a May 9 letter to the Department of Natural Resources, county parks director Dennis Callahan said the conditions imposed by the state "fundamentally change the character of the plan, substantially reduce the number of park activities available to the Shady Side community and the public, and make development of certain park features problematical or perhaps impossible."

The county decision leaves the land under state control.

"What's next is, we have to figure out what our plans are," said John F. Wilson, program manager for the Department of Natural Resources. "It wasn't in our game plan to be managing this property, but we'll do it."

Wilson said the park will probably feature trails but added he doesn't know whether the state will build other recreational areas.

Owens said she did not understand why a state agency would hamper county plans after five years of negotiations between county and state environmental officials. The state and county split the \$6 million cost of the land in 1998, and the county spent \$100,000 in planning money for the park in 2002.

State officials never intended to push the county out of the project, said Ren Serey, director of the Critical Area Commission. Serey said the commission approved the county's plans for the park but wanted to make sure ball fields and parking lots would not cover wetlands. He said the county would have had to show that the areas intended for ball fields did not include wetlands.

"The commission did not say there could be no ball fields or no parking lots," he said. "Really, the commission did not impose any conditions that wouldn't have been there anyway."

Serey said that under state law, plans for the park had to pass a Critical Area Commission review.

DNR officials said they were surprised by the turn of events. "It was our intention from the time we got involved with the property to turn it over to the county," Wilson said. "We're sorry it didn't work out for them from their standpoint."

Environmental activists in the Shady Side area had raised concerns about the county's plans for the park. They said county officials were secretive about their proposals and seemed intent on building ball fields despite the fact that Shady Side already has playing areas.

County officials, however, said the community wanted parks and that a panel of citizens appointed to write a master plan for Shady Side designated 20 percent of Franklin Point for recreation.

Owens said that even without the recreational component, she considers the county's \$3 million investment in Franklin Point wise.

"It will still be a nice place for people in that area to go and walk around," the county executive said.

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