



Group plans to build community center

Nonprofit made up of four churches wants to buy Deale land once set aside for Safeway

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Five years after Safeway chucked its plans to build a grocery store in Deale, another corporation has emerged with designs for the 16 acres at the intersection of Routes 256 and 258.

This time, the community isn't worried about a profit-minded company mucking up the waterfront village's character.

Cedar Grove United Methodist Church is negotiating with Safeway to buy the land to build a large community center, featuring South County's first indoor public pool.

It would be operated by the South County Community Development Corporation, a new nonprofit made up of Cedar Grove and three other local churches.

"We wanted to create some place to come together. There's no place around here for seniors to go, the kids don't have any place to play basketball - the community is underserved," said Jordan Matejcek, who is acting as the church's liaison to Safeway.

The center would include an indoor swimming pool, racquetball courts, a gym with two full basketball courts, a walking track, meeting rooms, an arcade and a commercial kitchen. It would provide the intangibles, too, such as a sense of community in this rural stretch of the county.

Matejcek said the negotiations with Safeway, which began a few months ago, were "in their final stages," though he couldn't say how long they would continue. He priced the center, including the land, at about \$8 million, a figure he called "very preliminary."

Safeway spokesman Greg TenEyck said, "We are still negotiating," but he said he could not discuss a timeline or sale price because of company policy.

"There's been a lot of interest in that property," he added.

Safeway scrapped its plans to build a 77,000-square-foot grocery store in 2001, in the face of public opposition similar in pitch to Lothian residents' current opposition to a proposed 248,000-square-foot plaza anchored by Target on Route 4.

"This center is [a] sign of bringing the struggle full circle, with a great victory leading into a center created for the community, by the community," said Michael Shay, vice president of the South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development. His organization helped mobilize the community against Safeway's plans.

Centenary, Franklin and St. Matthew's United Methodist churches, along with Cedar Grove, have been kicking around the idea of a community center for two years, Matejcek said.

A needs analysis conducted by the churches, as well as surveys given by community leaders, pointed out the obvious: the community needed a hub.

Space in schools and churches in Deale is recycled for community meetings, rec league practices and games, and other gatherings. The corporation's development committee, for example, convenes at Cedar Grove for lack of other options. At a meeting last Thursday night to discuss the Lothian development, the conversation often shifted to broader community needs.

"What about our senior citizens?" said Bonnie Shomette-Sudnick, who with her sister, Bettye Shomette, came out last Thursday night to protest Petrie Ross Venture's plans for the Target shopping center. "We're neglecting a lot of people in our community."

The nearest public indoor pool, the Arundel Olympic Swim Center, is next to **Annapolis** High School. The county is slated to open its second one, in Glen Burnie, in the fall. Severna Park boasts an indoor pool, too, at its community center. Depending on the pace of fund-raising, the Deale center wouldn't open for a few years.

"We're building it for the community, it'll be here for the community to use, and we need the community to be involved," Matejcek said, adding that a capital campaign would begin as soon as the land was secured.

Del. Bob Costa, a Deale Republican, said he would try to prop up the plan with government grants, among other means.

"I completely support this committee. We need indoor services for our kids," Costa said. "We'll help as much as we can. We'll start with a written plan. If we have to bake cookies, sell car washes, then that's what we'll do."

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