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Shore resort is blocked

Panel turns down development proposed near Blackwater refuge

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A state commission voted yesterday to block a proposed \$1 billion golf resort near the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, handing a surprise victory to environmentalists who feared the huge project would clutter one of the Chesapeake region's most beautiful landscapes.

The state Critical Area Commission, which reviews construction in waterfront areas, said the developer cannot build a conference center, hotel and retail complex on 313 acres of farms and wetlands next to the Little Blackwater River.

That ruling prevents construction of the centerpiece of Blackwater Resort, planned for land recently annexed by the city of Cambridge on the Eastern Shore.

Developer Duane Zentgraf potentially could still build a scaled-back project on 759 acres of farmland west of the waterfront, where he had proposed 2,700 homes. But he would have to design a new plan and receive approval from the Cambridge City Council, officials said.

Zentgraf's attorney said yesterday that the developer will consider his options. "All this does is stymie the construction of an executive conference center and a golf and country club," said the lawyer, William "Sandy" McAllister. "It's a questionable conclusion."

The 29-member commission, whose members are appointed by the governor, concluded that the resort should not be built along the waterfront because the tract is a "resource conservation area" surrounded by other protected open space.

"The project could promote a sprawl development pattern that is not consistent with agriculture or the preservation of natural resources," said David Blazer, chairman of a commission subcommittee that studied the project.

One of the local residents thrilled with the decision was farmer Barbara Edgar. Her family and several other farmers formed an unusual alliance with the **Chesapeake Bay** Foundation in fighting the developer, who employed 10 lobbyists.

"This is one step toward saving our farmland, our Little Blackwater River and our wildlife refuge," said Edgar, whose family has tilled and hunted in the countryside south of Cambridge since 1885. "I hope this stops the whole project completely, and our heritage and all our farmland will be preserved."

Cambridge Mayor Cleveland Rippons has been pushing the project as a way to bring in thousands of new residents and millions of dollars in tax revenue to a city that has lost population over the last half century.

The mayor declined to speculate about what might happen next, but said, "This does not mean the end of the project." He said it would be premature to discuss how the city would react to a revised proposal.

William C. Baker, president of the **Chesapeake Bay** Foundation, said he hopes the commission's vote will kill the project, including all the homes planned away from the waterfront.

"The site should remain rural and agricultural," Baker said. "This project would result in water quality degradation in the Little Blackwater River and potentially the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge."

If the developer tries to proceed with a more limited version of the project, Baker said his group will continue to urge Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. to stop it by buying the land with state money earmarked for preserving open space. But that would require the cooperation of the developer, who owns the land, Baker said.

Henry Fawell, a spokesman for Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., said the governor did not ask the commission to vote a certain way. But Fawell said the administration is conducting "ongoing discussions" with preservation groups to try to protect the area.

"The governor believes the process played itself out in a thorough and objective manner," Fawell said. "The governor has been working independently with private preservation groups for the last month to protect the health of the Little Blackwater River, the wildlife refuge and the bay."

Over the past year, environmentalists have criticized Ehrlich for not intervening to persuade local officials to stop the project.

The Blackwater proposal was one of the largest and most contentious ever considered by the Critical Area Commission. The panel received about 4,000 e-mails and 100 letters from the public, almost all opposing a project that many people feared would harm the wildlife refuge, according to a committee report.

The panel, at its meeting in Crownsville yesterday, was considering a request by Cambridge and Dorchester County to change the designation of 313 acres along the Little

Blackwater River - land classified as a "resource conservation area" - to an "intensely developed area."

The panel ruled that the proposal fails to meet legal requirements that say such conservation protections can be removed only in areas adjacent to other intensely developed areas. On the south, east and west of the Blackwater Resort site are wetlands, farms and forests. To the north is a school, but this also lies in a conservation area, according to the commission.

"There is just so much development everywhere, and this is one place where we still have some open space left," said Helen Malkus, who has farmed north of the 27,000-acre wildlife refuge for a half-century. "This project would just destroy the open space and the whole environment."

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