



Man-made marsh key for builder

Filling 4 acres of river could enable 279 luxury homes in St. Michaels

BY TOM PELTON

SUN REPORTER

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED OCTOBER 16, 2006

ST. MICHAELS // Beside a windswept point in this Eastern Shore town, a developer wants to fill 4 acres of the Miles River with sand and stone - part of a plan to build an artificial wetlands that would allow construction of 279 luxury homes on nearby farmland.

Developer George Valanos says his faux wetlands, planted with spartina grass, would halt erosion and help the Chesapeake Bay.

"The soft shoreline will purify the water and create more habitat for wildlife and aquatic life. It's what the whole environmental movement is moving toward," Valanos said.

But to neighbors such as John North, the man-made marsh idea is an environmental scam - a landfill, thinly disguised with grass, that would enable Valanos to put houses closer to the water than the state usually allows.

"The developer wants to take the people's river and fill it with mud and rocks so he can build closer to the river," said North, a retired judge and former chairman of the state's waterfront construction review commission. "What a terrible precedent. Are we going to fill up the Chesapeake Bay so these developers can build more houses closer to the water?"

If approved, the marsh project would enable construction of the Miles Point subdivision 150 feet from the river - half the 300-foot setback usually required.

Maryland's Critical Area Commission, which reviews waterfront development, agreed to the artificial wetlands and reduced setback in a settlement after it tried to impose the 300-foot buffer and the developer sued.

The state Department of the Environment and other agencies are considering Valanos' application for a permit to build the wetlands, which would extend 110 feet into the river on state-owned land. A public hearing is scheduled Oct. 26.

The environmental agency and the nonprofit Chesapeake Bay Foundation have encouraged the construction of wetlands over the past two decades as a greener way to protect real estate from waves and erosion than the rock walls that builders have long dumped along shorelines. The wetlands filter runoff from developments and provide habitat for crabs, fish and birds, supporters say.

The Miles Point project would add about 4 acres to the 7,515 acres of wetlands that have been built or restored in Maryland over the past eight years. The state has pledged to double the amount of new wetlands by 2010.

But even if Maryland meets that goal, researchers have found that the new wetlands don't always last. And artificial marshes built as part of housing developments do not attract as much wildlife as natural ones, a study suggests.

Tens of thousands of acres of wetlands have been lost in recent decades in Maryland because of rising sea levels, caused by global warming, and development, said Michael Kearney, a professor at the University of Maryland. About 600,000 acres of wetlands remain in the state, perhaps half the marshland that helped filter bay pollutants more than a century ago.

Zell Steever, a former senior ecologist for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said manmade marshes can survive in sheltered areas. But the Miles Point wetlands would go farther into open water than normal, in a windy area not sheltered enough for marsh grass, he said.

"There is no evidence this will last or improve water quality for the Chesapeake Bay," said Steever, who lives near the project.

The developer's engineers disagree. Officials with Environmental Concern Inc. of St. Michaels said they've built similar wetlands in open areas of the Miles River, Choptank River and Eastern Bay that have survived storms and succeeded in reducing erosion.

Kody Cario, the firm's construction manager, noted a wetlands built about a half-mile south of Miles Point that survived Tropical Storm Isabel in 2003.

"They're like kidneys - they filter pollutants out of the water, just as your kidney takes pollutants out of your bloodstream," Cario said.

A long-range question is whether building wetlands at the edge of waterfront housing is futile, given rising sea levels and the natural sinking of land on the Eastern Shore, said Ralph W. Tiner, a wetlands coordinator with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Rising waters devour about 260 acres of coastal land every year in Maryland.

"I don't think building a salt marsh out of a mud flat is a good idea, given the conditions today, with rising sea levels and subsiding land," said Tiner.

J. Court Stevenson, a professor at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science, said he recently studied eight artificial wetlands in Maryland and found that five had succeeded in preventing further erosion.

Five protected the waterfronts they were meant to shield; the other three were damaged by storms and waves, he said. But the wetlands built to protect houses generally did not attract much wildlife, because birds and animals tend to shy away from dense development, Stevenson said.

"In these wetlands restoration projects, it's really hard to bring some of these animals back," he said.

The Miles Point project has been the subject of protests and lawsuits from neighbors for almost a decade.

The subdivision would increase the number of houses in this more than 300-year-old village by about 40 percent, adding 279 neotraditional homes priced from \$500,000 to \$900,000, along with tennis courts, a hotel, pool, park and pier. It would be built on 89 acres that today is mostly soybean fields and trees.

The roughly \$150 million project would be protected from storms and waves by the wetlands, which would cost about \$1 million. Valanos said an alternative - not part of the current agreement with the state and town - might be a rock wall along the shore, which he could build for about \$400,000.

At the edge of the field targeted for development is an eroding 6-foot clay bluff, from which clumps the size of televisions have tumbled into the water, muddying the river.

To protect a 2,100-foot stretch of shoreline along the nose-shaped point, the company plans to build a 3-foot-high rock barrier up to 110 feet out into shallow water, said Gene Slear, vice president of Environmental Concern.

Behind the barrier, workers would dump 11,900 cubic yards of sand, then plant more than 100,000 spartina plants. At four places in the sea wall, openings would allow the tide to enter through canals, covering the field with water at high tide.

"Is it as good as a natural marsh? Nope," Slear said. "But remember, the natural marsh is gone here."

Jennifer Aiosa, senior scientist at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, said Slear's 32-year-old firm has a "tremendous reputation" for building wetlands. But she noted that planting marsh grass tends to succeed in some areas - notably, former wetlands drained years ago to create farm fields - more than others, such as shorelines hit by waves.

"If wetlands once existed there, planting new wetlands will probably have a greater chance of success," she said.

North, whose family has lived along the river since the 1700s and who served as chairman of the state's Critical Area Commission from 1989 to 2002, said he's never seen a wetlands at the Miles Point site during his 75 years of sailing and fishing along the shore.

He believes that a manmade marsh would be washed away by the river's strong waves, just as another artificial wetland north of his home was destroyed a few years ago.

To illustrate his knowledge of local currents and winds, North showed a sailboat called a Chesapeake Bay log canoe, hewn from loblolly pine, that he and his ancestors have used to cruise the river since 1882.

"It's really a wildlife refuge here now - we have thousands of geese, swans, muskrat, otter," he said, as sunlight flashed on the water. "To think of this shore crowded with houses and people kind of makes you sick."

Copyright © 2006, The Baltimore Sun