



Leopold signs order to protect watersheds

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SUN REPORTER

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED DECEMBER 7, 2006

In one of his first official acts, new Anne Arundel County Executive John R. Leopold signed an executive order yesterday emphasizing that violators of state laws designed to protect critical watersheds could be criminally prosecuted.

Leopold, a moderate Republican who succeeded Democrat Janet S. Owens on Monday, already possessed the authority to refer alleged violators to the state attorney general's office for reviews.

But having campaigned on a message that he would not be "controlled by developers," Leopold said he wanted to set a tone for his administration.

"Violations of the environmental laws will trigger immediate actions by the administration," Leopold said in a statement.

One local land-use consultant reacted cautiously to Leopold's announcement.

"For the industry, John is saying that the environment is very important to him," said John S. Pantelides, head of the nonprofit Anne Arundel County Alliance for Fair Land Use.

The order came two days after the county Board of Appeals granted retroactive approvals to allow a professional homebuilder, Daryl C. Wagner, to keep a palatial home he built without permits. The county filed a lawsuit last year that seeks to tear down Wagner's home. Leopold said Tuesday that he would not drop the litigation.

While not making a judgment on the board's ruling, Leopold said the Wagner case has generated "palpable anger" among residents who say previous administrations protected "certain sacred cows and special interests."

The executive called for "proactive" enforcement that would reduce the retroactive requests for variances and permits.

A rewrite of the Critical Area laws is expected to come before the council next year. Leopold said he looks at the rewrite as a chance to boost fines, now \$5,000 for illegal grading.

"The current sanctions are viewed as the cost of doing business," Leopold said. "We want sanctions that bite."

Pantelides said that many developers are amenable to raising fines for critical area violations, which he said would be more effective at reducing violations than bringing criminal charges.

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