

"Federation Corner" column
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Crown Farm annexation still marked by failure

by Wayne Goldstein

This is the fourth column about the Crown Farm annexation (see Federation Corner columns from March 30, April 13 and April 20 of this year) because all of the problems created by the desire for shortcuts in this process have not been solved. An annexation that does not respect all affected public policies deserves to be called a failure. For that reason, the Crown Farm annexation remains a failure.

Last September, 250 neighbors of the proposed Crown Farm development attended a three-day charrette sponsored by the new owners. They heard a lot of promises made in response to their many concerns. One of those implicit promises is about to be broken. Hours were spent at the charrette talking about the historic Crown Farm, the farm house and fifteen outbuildings that make up this working farm that dates back to the 1880s. A tour of the historic buildings was even included as part of the charrette. A Post reporter wrote that people said: "Use the existing home and barns, which date back several centuries, for community meetings or dances or arts and crafts."

The web site for the charrette called the Crown Farm project a "A Community Designed by its Neighbors - A charrette is a series of intense planning meetings designed to encourage and facilitate full public participation in the creation of a vision for the development of the Crown Property. One of the key characteristics that distinguishes a charrette from a typical planning meeting is that it offers maximum public participation and a unique opportunity for participants to provide early input and immediate feedback to the design team. Daily work sessions and open houses provide interested residents an opportunity to share their ideas, build consensus, review the work in progress and engage the design team in detailed discussions. The end result is a plan that shares the ultimate vision of the charrette participants."

After all of this happened last September and the neighbors then went home, excited about how the historic buildings could serve them as well as the future residents of the new development. As these neighbors that helped design the proposed community, they were entitled to learn of the progress being made to fulfill their vision. Instead, it became obvious this past March that the developer was only interested in saving and restoring the two residential buildings for an unknown reuse and would give the rest of the buildings to Gaithersburg on land being donated to the city for a park. This property is a designated historic resource in Montgomery County and county planners responded to this plan with strong criticism of city staff:

"Historic Preservation staff has repeatedly encouraged the City of Gaithersburg planning staff and the developer to respect the historic Crown Farm in any development proposal. At a presentation to the developer and City staff, Park and Planning staff presented the history of the property and the value of the farmstead at a planning meeting with Gaithersburg staff in February [2006]. Yet the proposal presented to the Planning Board shows little understanding of the value of the historic site."

The Montgomery County Planning Board supported its staff but the Montgomery County Council included none of the requirements for the historic buildings that it included for affordable housing, a school site, and a payment for the transfer of agricultural development rights when it voted to approve annexation to the city in April. Now, the plans that were bad in March are far worse in July. The developer, instead of restoring the two historic houses for community use, has chosen to sell the restored buildings as one private residence. Instead of leaving the rest of the buildings in the park for Gaithersburg to decide what to do with them, the developer now wants to bury utilities in this park, re-grade it and plant trees while tearing down

all of the buildings that the community believed would be restored and used for "community meetings or dances or arts and crafts."

The Crown Farm developer, KB Homes, was fined over \$5 million dollars last summer by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). It has had a consent decree with the FTC since 1979, which it has repeatedly violated. As in the past, KB Homes promises to do better in following the consent decree in the future. However, if seeming promises made less than a year ago about preserving and reusing historic buildings as asked for by the community are going to be broken, and Gaithersburg staff still doesn't care about this, than what should Crown Farm neighbors assume about other promises that have been made about this project?

The deadline to submit comments about the Crown Farm annexation agreement is 5 pm on Wednesday, August 2. The Mayor and Council are scheduled to vote on the agreement on Monday night, August 7. If you live near the Crown Farm and you believed you would be able to use the historic buildings either as community use space or for artists, you need to contact the Mayor and Council before August 2 and tell them that you do not want the implied promise made at last year's charrette to be broken.

If the developer's plans for the park are approved, there is no way that the historic buildings can be saved without violating the annexation agreement. It may also be that city law will be violated if this annexation agreement is signed as is and there is no chance to evaluate and protect the historic buildings before the planned demolition takes place.

Gaithersburg residents keep hearing promises about every new development that it won't have a negative impact and instead they see traffic and other problems get worse. Just as the Kentlands provided historic resources that have become important community facilities, the Crown Farm buildings can still give a unique gift to the community. However, Gaithersburg residents have to demand it now before the agreement is signed that guarantees the demolition of the barns and other useable buildings. It is that intervention that will prevent this annexation from being considered a failure.