

"Federation Corner" column
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Planning Board faces great challenge with Indian Spring project

by Wayne Goldstein

Indian Spring Country Club was first built in 1937, just south of University Blvd. and east of Colesville Rd. When the owners learned in the '50s that the Beltway would be coming through their property, they relocated to Layhill Rd. In 2004, facing declining membership, the owners decided to sell off part of the 36-hole facility for housing, with plans to retain 18 holes and the clubhouse. However, after MNCPPC planning staff recommended against approving the project because of the negative environmental effects of the golf course originally built to the edge of the existing Bel Pre Creek, and the Planning Board agreed with their staff recommendations, the owner instead decided to sell the entire property for housing, rather than change the golf course to meet today's environmental standards.

The new plan was presented to the Planning Board last week. The initial public hearing started as standing room only, lasting almost 5 hours. I have followed the development of this project, attended previous hearings, and I listened to most of the testimony that lasted until midnight. This is one of the most complex projects I have ever participated in because, as is often the case, this infill development is trying to successfully fit into an area with inadequate transportation, educational, and environmental infrastructure. Unfortunately, MNCPPC staff has not fully and independently researched how to best provide this badly needed infrastructure and staff has also shown too great a willingness to sacrifice the environment for roads and schools, based on too little information about either.

Four different citizens associations participated in this hearing, and several had hired their own attorneys to help them make their presentations. Amazingly, the developer of this project has agreed to help pay for the grade-separated interchange at Georgia Avenue and Randolph Road. However, there is no requirement that the timing of the development, with its significant new traffic, and the building of the interchange be coordinated. Such coordination used to be required under the county's Annual Growth Policy, but it was eliminated in exchange for transportation and education impact taxes to pay for the infrastructure. However, if the government doesn't build what is needed, developers can still build their projects when they are ready to do so.

I was quite surprised to learn that MNCPPC transportation planning staff had made no effort to determine the effect of the two nearby, planned ICC interchanges on local roads near this project even though the State Highway Administration has already done much of that analysis to show that the ICC would increase traffic on those local roads and intersections adjacent to ICC interchanges. The most controversial issue is the construction of a long-planned extension of Tivoli Lake Blvd. when this project is built. The residents of the existing Tivoli development unequivocally believe that extending this road will divide and destroy their community due to massive cut-through traffic that the Master Plan specifically promises to control. If this connection were to be approved by the Planning Board, extraordinary efforts to discourage cut-through traffic should be guaranteed, efforts that go well beyond standard traffic calming measures such as speed bumps. This could mean making use of speed cameras and perhaps modified red light cameras to use guaranteed fines to control speeding and illegal cut-through traffic.

In the alternative, the current Indian Spring Country Club access could be the only access, with emergency vehicle access allowed through the adjacent Layhill View community should the main access road be blocked. This community also fears what would happen if cut-through traffic used their narrow, winding roads. This limited access would be presented to potential buyers as a price they would pay to live in this infill community. In addition, the developer could be required to permanently fund a shuttle van to take residents to the Glenmont Metro, similar to what is being required of the developer of the Crown Farm to

provide such a shuttle service to the Shady Grove Metro. Since Ride-On will not provide service unless it can use an extended Tivoli Lake Blvd., this private shuttle would give residents another means of dedicated transportation access.

As for education infrastructure requirements, it appears that Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is making many of the same mistakes in Layhill that it made with the Seven Locks Elementary School (ES) scandal. MCPS claims it needs a school site in the planned project. However, there is a nearby closed school that could be reclaimed, although it would be difficult and costly to relocate the existing government user. In addition, even though 3 of the 4 elementary schools that serve the area are and will be overcrowded, MCPS is many years away from building additions and doing modernizations of these schools, instead choosing to demand a new site for a new school. It took the County Council to require MCPS to keep Seven Locks ES and to modernize and enlarge at least one of several outdated, overcrowded elementary schools in the same school cluster, rather than building a new school on Kendale Rd. It may take the County Council to require MCPS to modernize and/or enlarge Georgian Forest ES and Glenallen ES in a timely manner instead of building a new Indian Spring ES.

This project indicates that we need an MNCPPC staff that is willing to challenge the factual accuracy of any claim by developers or other government agencies. They stood up to the developer's initial plan to allow a golf course built in the 1950s to continue to go to the edge of the stream, without any forest buffer to protect the stream from too much runoff or runoff containing the fertilizers and chemicals needed to maintain golf courses. However, when the developer claimed that extending Tivoli Lake Blvd. across Bel Pre Creek would be "cost-prohibitive," MNCPPC staff chose to recommend that fill dirt be dumped in the stream valley so that a shorter, cheaper structure could be built. One could assume from this recommendation that this staff believes it is more important to approve the largest possible project than to protect the environment.

Not only does Bel Pre Creek have a wide flood plain at this location, but this section of the creek is part of a botanical special protection area because of the existence of several species of rare, threatened and endangered (RTE) plants. Flood plains allow creeks to spread out so that fast moving flood waters cannot concentrate their force and cause massive erosion that undermines trees and even sewer pipes as well as suffocating what lives in or near the stream with mud and silt. When a flood plain is confined, as would happen with this structure, flood waters back up and then rush through the narrow opening with far greater depth, velocity and erosive power, which would threaten everything downstream, including the RTE plants that are to be protected from such impacts.

In addition, MNCPPC and county staff continue to rely on outdated, ineffective, expensive and massive stormwater ponds and structures to control runoff, when a new generation of smaller, cheaper structures such as individual raingardens, storm chambers, and pervious driveways that let water pass through them are ignored. The savings from using these more attractive and effective approaches could also be used to help pay for a complete bridge across Bel Pre Creek.

I've recommended that the Planning Board take the time to understand every aspect of this project before approving it and to make sure that promises made to protect existing communities and to both protect and improve the environment are kept. I believe that the Planning Board could also rely on the language in the Glenmont Sector Plan to delay the building of the project until the nearby interchange is almost complete, in order to minimize traffic impacts. If the developer also can't afford to build the bridge across Bel Pre Creek, then perhaps the project should be downsized to the point that the new project doesn't generate the traffic that requires that road and bridge connection.

It is also unfortunate that there has been no discussion of the impact that will be caused by the loss of the country club's club house and banquet facilities. The North Bethesda conference center was meant to be a needed meeting and celebratory space in addition to Indian Spring, not as a replacement for it. This is a vital

community and county resource that should not be so casually discarded. The Planning Board may also want to consider the effect of this loss and the possibility of retaining the building as part of a different project that it might be more inclined to approve.