

"Federation Corner" column
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Common sense demands saving the farm

by Peggy Dennis
MCCF President

In March, the community surrounding Nick's Organic Farm (NOF) in Potomac was dismayed to learn that the Board of Education (BOE) had voted to drop their long-standing lease with Nick Marvel of the 20-acre future middle school site on Brickyard Road. County Executive Isiah Leggett was asking for control of the land so that it might become four soccer fields through a "public-private" partnership, presumably with MSI Soccer, Inc.

This proposal has spawned several court challenges which are costly to both the local community and the taxpayers who must pay for the County's side of the fight. A trial date has been set for December 15 to consider the violation of the Open Meetings Act by the BOE. Enforcement and remedies could include voiding the lease between the school board and the County. In addition, an administrative appeal of the BOE's action has been filed and the Maryland State BOE is expected to rule on this case in early 2012.

Why does this situation represent such a bizarre 180 degree shift from the Executive's past record and behavior? Let me go back to 2005 when Leggett was running against Doug Duncan for the Executive's seat. The BOE, under pressure from Duncan, was proposing to demolish Seven Locks Elementary School and turn over the 10-acre school site to be redeveloped as affordable housing. The local community was outraged and turned to Leggett for help. He listened to local activists with a sympathetic ear and provided the wise counsel and advice that ultimately lead to the proposal's defeat. Truth and common sense prevailed

In the case of Nick's Organic Farm, truth and common sense seem to have been tossed aside. The change in leasing was initiated by Leggett in November 2009 with a letter to the BOE asserting that the land in question was "essentially abandoned" and could better be used to provide playing fields for "at risk youth". Nothing could be further from the truth.

Rather than being "essentially abandoned", this land has been husbanded and farmed organically for over 30 years. Unlike the farms in Montgomery's "Agriculture Reserve" and elsewhere in the Chesapeake watershed, this farm is surrounded by private homes and far from commercial agriculture where pollen from genetically modified crops can cross-fertilize and contaminate his seed stock. The site is uniquely suited for organic farming and, after 31 years, the biologically rich soil structure cannot be duplicated or relocated to another site.

Moreover, NOF produces organic seed stock including seeds from heritage varieties that are hard to find, and sells to other organic farmers and some small, specialty seed companies. A number of organic farmers in the Chesapeake region depend on NOF for reliably true organic seed stock. Should his fields be plowed under, these farmers will have to go much further and pay considerably more for their seeds. Shrinking the farm in a "shared use" scenario--some acreage left for farming and some bulldozed for

playing fields and the required parking lots--would sacrifice the level of productivity that other organic farmers depend on.

Mr. Leggett's justification of the need for more playing fields for "at risk youth" is patently absurd. Potomac has very few "at risk youth". The County is very well supplied with over 500 playing fields, most under the jurisdiction of the Parks and Recreation Departments and Montgomery County Public Schools. The Parks Department's recent *Vision 2030 Survey* found that Potomac has a 4% surplus of soccer fields, while Takoma, Langley Park, and Wheaton have a deficit of soccer fields somewhere between 23% and 46%. Programs targeting "at risk youth" will not be aided by adding more playing fields on the opposite side of the county.

Leggett maintains that the Potomac Master Plans calls for this site to be turned into playing fields. What the Plan actually says is that the site "could be developed as (a) local park with ball fields or other recreational uses". The Potomac residents who worked so hard on the Master Plan were appalled to find that these words had been twisted to read "will be developed as ball fields" with neither transparency nor community input. Much as Mr. Duncan had worked behind closed doors with the BoE to spring a *fait accompli* onto the Seven Locks community, Mr. Leggett is now doing the same to the Brickyard Road community.

What can our County Executive do to mollify the mighty "soccer lobby" and provide more fields where they are truly needed? First, the County's process for renting its public fields is fragmented, time-consuming and exasperating. So he should start by centralizing, and rationalizing the permit process. Second, he should persuade soccer groups with money to spend lavishly to enter into a "public/private partnership" to improve the playing fields we already have. Third, he could counsel soccer groups to share fields, two teams to a field, for daily practice sessions, thus doubling the usage of our existing fields.

Although his lease with the BoE precludes any activity other than farming, Nick Maravel is willing and eager to expand his work to make this unique location also serve as an educational facility--a site where sustainable organic farming can be demonstrated and taught to future generations. Preserving and expanding the usefulness of Nick's Organic Farm would be fully in keeping with the Executive's dual commitments to encourage small businesses and to promote local, sustainable agriculture. It will be a permanent blot on Leggett's record if he persists in even shrinking this unique, irreplaceable and important regional asset.

To learn more about Nick's Organic Farm, visit their website at: www.savenicksorganicfarm.org

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net