

Battle Rages Over Development of Woodbridge Army Lab Site

By Spencer S. Hsu
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Within range of the towers that once jolted sky and earth with the electrical impact of a nuclear blast 20 times a day, John Gottschalk crooked in a mission to find and scoop up a slender weed.

"Eloea," the 75-year-old environmentalist and former director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service explained, saying the humble weed's name as though it were "Eureka."

In a small twist to the Cold War's end, the closure of a little-known, top-secret Army base in Prince William County has led to a new battle in the long war between environmentalists and developers. The contest pits one of the county's biggest pending development proposals against urgent calls to save one of Northern Virginia's few remaining natural preserves.

The closure of the Woodbridge Research Facility (formerly the Harry Diamond Laboratory), scheduled for September 1994, has set off competition for the 577-acre site, which has been fenced in and isolated from most humans since World War II.

A loose alliance of back yard and governmental preservationists wants the Army to give the wildlife service full control of a preserve they say could attract up to 100,000 visitors a year.

On the opposing side is the Library of Congress, which hopes to build 18 buildings in the heart of the site. And, just across a nearby utility fence at the base's northern end, Arlington developers Stephen and Preston Caruthers are pressing ahead with plans to build office towers, a boat marina, 1,500 houses and a golf course to bolster the founding Route 1 corridor.

Environmentalists say the library's plans to use up to 100 acres of open meadow would wipe out the base's most valuable ecological feature and damage the surrounding marshes and forest. And they worry that the Caruthers's project, known as Belmont Center, would divert the drainage of water that sustains downstream marshes.

"I'm doing this just because I live here. I'd like it to be here for my kids and grand-kids," said the environmentalists' spokesman, James Waggoner, a retired Army colonel living in Woodbridge. From inside the base's rusting fences, "You can look around and see land locked up for the last 50 years by the government. It's different from any other forest in the county."

One recent day, Gottschalk, Waggoner and companions scouted for wildlife on the inconspicuous base site, which has been partly dismantled since 1990.

Here and there among the trees and fields stood eerie Cold War sentinels, tall poles and wires strung together the length of football fields. Through these wires, Army scientists from 1970 to 1988 regularly blasted the equivalent of 50,000 volt-meters, comparable to small lightning bolts, to test military electronics' endurance against nuclear detonations.

Last spring, the Army announced a proposal to turn the land over in part or in whole to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The closure stems both from a 1988 environmental lawsuit and the Pentagon's decision to shrink and relocate the 90-member research staff.

Since plans to close the base were announced three years ago, Army and independent naturalists found that the testing grounds support more than 180 wild bird species, more than 150 deer and families of fox, beaver, muskrat and otter. Resurgent bald eagles nest at the neighboring Mason Neck Wildlife Refuge across the Potomac River use the area for hunting, as do osprey, herons and Great-horned owls. The site consists of 477 acres of forest and wetlands and 100 acres of meadow.

A coalition that includes the nearby Lake Ridge and Occoquan civic associations, the Northern Virginia Audubon Society, the Audubon Naturalist Society, and U.S. Sen. John W. Warner (R) and Charles S. Robb (D) has formed to urge the Army to deliver all of the site, and not just the forest and protected wetlands, to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"This area has been largely insulated from human pressures for the past 40 years. . . . It represents one of the few large tracts of open grasslands and wet meadows left in northern Virginia," said Ronald Lamberton, a regional director for the wildlife service.

But on the other side, Librarian of Congress James H. Billington has argued that the location is ideal for a storage facility housing two million books. Such a project would "protect . . . the principal wildlife habitat and at the same time provide for the preservation of the records documenting our nation's cultural heritage," he said.

The move would be the first stage of a relocation plan continuing through the year 2050, when the

library would house its film and audio collections, microfilming department and library-exchange operations at the Woodbridge site.

The library has powerful allies. Last week, it secured a House of Representatives amendment in a military appropriations bill granting it the 100 acres free of charge. Warner has vowed to quash the measure in the Senate.

Meanwhile, in a reasoning petition before the Prince William Board of County Supervisors, two Caruthers partnerships are seeking permission to put the first 10-story-plus buildings in the county—plus houses, restaurants, a hotel, a marina, a highway interchange and a helicopter landing pad—on 312

acres directly north of the Army base. The builders have owned the land for decades.

The plan calls for as much as 1.9 million square feet of office space and 300,000 square feet of retail space.

Michael Lobely, an attorney for the two partnerships, said the owners are fully within their rights to build upstream of the military base.

"Most of that area is now zoned for heavy industry, town houses and apartments," he said. In fact, the Belmont Center plan calls for fewer houses and industry than the county now permits, and provides a "wonderful buffer" via the golf course, Lobely said.

The county's planning commis-

sion approved the proposal last month. Local Supervisor Hilda M. Berg (D-Woodbridge) has called the Caruthers proposal "a good package . . . as good as we're going to get," clearing the way for a Board of Supervisors hearing set for July 20.

Preservationists are not so sure. "It's one of those things where you can destroy the whole by taking away a part," Waggoner said. Large-scale development will reduce the amount of water that empties into the wetlands on the Army base and dump contaminants into the flow, he said.

Though environmentalists agree with Lobely that the Belmont proposal is an improvement on what is now allowed, they would like to see

a forest buffer as large as possible between the proposed project and the Army base.

They also have asked that the proposed golf course meet stringent pesticide and drainage standards that the ballpark be placed far behind the base fence-line and that office towers be capped and set back from the area.

Short of congressional action, the base parcel's fate remains in Army hands. The Baltimore office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is conducting an environmental impact study due this fall that will include a recommendation for the land's use. The report must be approved by the assistant secretary of the Army for installation, logistics

and environment, with input from the Base Realignment and Closure Commission.

Gottschalk, an Arlington resident who ran the Fish and Wildlife Service from 1964 to 1970, summed up the fight while holding up his slender wetland weed.

The elodea, he said, often is used in household aquariums and may seem mundane. But it rarely appears in areas inhabited by humans, for it grows only in the cleanest water.

"Here you have a piece of property that can be saved with very little effort, free of charge," Waggoner said. "But because it's been closed to the public, it has no constituency."

HISTORIC SITE FILE: *Army Electromagnetic Pulse.*
PRINCE WILLIAM PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM
RELIC/Bull Run Reg Lib, Manassas, VA