

Site Might Contain Slaves' Graves

HISTORIC SITE FILE: BEL AIR
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Local preservationists and county planners, believing slave grave sites might be on a tract of land, persuaded the Prince William County Planning Commission to postpone a decision on a controversial housing development surrounding the historic Bel Air plantation in Dale City.

HC Land Co. is seeking approval to rezone 130 acres off Minnieville Road for 235 single-family homes at 2.4 homes an acre. The land is one of the last stretches of open space in the county's crowded eastern end and once belonged to the 14-room Bel Air plantation, which dates from 1740. Only Rippon Lodge, the former tobacco plantation in Woodbridge built in 1725 and recently acquired by the county for public use, is believed to be older.

The Bel Air house and the adjacent 25 acres have been protected from development for more than a decade by a historic easement donated by the Flory family, which bought the home and surrounding property a half-century ago. The 130 acres planned for the subdivision are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a designation that does not prevent the property from development.

But local preservationists and county planners are concerned that slaves' remains may be buried in the earth to be churned up for the Saratoga Hunt development. On Wednesday night, they convinced the planning commission that HC Land Co. may not have surveyed the land thoroughly enough to determine whether it contains slave quarters or other artifacts.

"The applicants . . . have spent a lot of time and money trying to convince you that no history took place on this piece of land," said Jan Cunard of Woodbridge, a member of the county's historical commission who strongly opposes the project. "But plantation life would have gone on everywhere on this property. Slaves would have been living far from the plantation house."

After Cunard and more than two dozen other residents spoke out against the project at a hearing, the commission voted 7-0 to defer a vote until its September meeting. In the meantime, the panel hopes the developer, county planners and the historical commission will reach agreement on whether further archaeological study is necessary.

"There seemed to be enough inconsistency between the developer's proposal and the [planning] staff's position," said Thomas Raseta, a planning commission member who represents the Coles magisterial district, where the property is located.

"People are uncomfortable with the fact that the entire parcel is on the Register of Historic Places," Raseta added, "and they want another level of detail. Once they start bulldozing it, it's history."

Attorney Jay du Von, who represents HC Land Co., noted the historic easement on Bel Air and the 25 acres around it and said two archaeological studies conducted on the 130-acre site--one in 1982 and the other submitted with the application this spring--did not uncover any significant artifacts. But preservationists say the studies' primary focus was on prehistoric artifacts, not more recent Colonial and Civil War-era history.

The study conducted this spring did turn up two unmarked graves on the property slated for development, but it's unknown whether they belong to slaves.

"We have nothing to hide," du Von said. "And we're happy to have anybody review the work."

The concerns of local preservationists are echoed by the county planner who reviews projects that potentially could infringe on historically significant areas. Planner Debrarae Karnes called the developer's study "incomplete" and said it failed to meet the county's minimum standards for archaeological study. But the planning staff recommended that it be approved anyway because the plan met other requirements set by the county's land-use plan, including money to pay for roads, schools and other services.

HC Land Co. has also offered to set aside 54 acres of the property for open space, although about half that land is wetlands that cannot be developed anyway.

Opponents of the project also object to the density of homes because the land, deemed historically significant by the county's land-use plan, is designated for less dense development. The developer originally proposed 2.8 homes on each acre but reduced the number to 2.4 homes.

Bel Air has a rich history. The foundation of the three-story house is the remnant of a fort built in the late 1600s. Maj. Charles Ewell, a cousin of George Washington, built the house, and Washington is said to have slept there on his honeymoon. Mason Locke Weems, the Washington biographer, married Ewell's granddaughter, and the couple lived in the house in the early 1800s.

The house is now owned by Randi and Bill Naedele, who say they plan to continue living there. Randi Naedele's parents, William and Anne Flory, bought the house and grounds in 1949, embarking on a decades-long restoration project to reverse years of neglect.

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