

Planners Vote Against Developing Plantation

Traffic Near Bel Air Already Congested

By LISA REIN
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The Prince William County Planning Commission decided not to endorse plans this week for a contended housing development surrounding the historic Bel Air plantation in Dale City, citing traffic congestion, rather than preservation issues, as primary concerns.

The commission voted, 5 to 2, to deny Richmond American Homes' request to rezone 130 acres around the plantation for 206 homes, an average of 2.1 per acre. The vote followed a public hearing on Wednesday night, at which almost 40 residents spoke against the Saratoga Hunt development, citing environmental, preservation and traffic issues that would plague an already congested neighborhood.

Commissioners Hector Quintana and Billy W. Isbell cast the dissenting votes. Thomas H. Sarcel was absent.

Although the property's historical significance—and the poten-

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BY MARGARET THOMAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Preserving the Bel Air plantation house and surrounding land is not as big a concern as nearby traffic, county planners say.

Planners Deterred by Threat of Traffic

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tial that development could unearth slave graves or other artifacts—had threatened for several months to derail the project, it was the threat of an estimated 2,000 additional daily car trips on a two-lane stretch of Minnieville Road that swayed the commission.

"I was leaning toward recommending" the rezoning, said Commissioner Thomas G. Raseta, whose Coles District includes the property. "But it seemed pretty clear that transportation was a really hellacious issue. . . . When you consider 206 houses there, it sort of gets to the point where the straw breaks the camel's back."

The project will go before the Board of County Supervisors next month for a final vote. The board is not bound to follow the Planning Commission's action.

Minnieville Road stretches from Dumfries to Woodbridge, ranging between two lanes and six. The half-mile stretch between Silverdale and Cardinal drives, through the heart of Dale City, already is heavily congested. Although the developer offered to widen a 900-foot stretch in front of the property to four lanes, many residents and planning commissioners said that wouldn't be enough.

The company also said it would pay for a design study for widening a larger stretch of Minnieville. But

any construction would be funded by the state, and a widening is not on the list of road projects in the county's six-year road plan.

"People can't get out of their driveways now on Minnieville, and there's nothing coming down the pike to help," said Earl Cunard, a Woodbridge resident who spoke against the project.

The land off Minnieville Road is one of the last stretches of open space in the county's eastern end and has a rich history as part of the Bel Air plantation, built in 1740. Only Rippon Lodge, the former tobacco plantation house built in 1725 and acquired by the county for public use last year, is older.

The Bel Air plantation's 14-room house and an 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 being developed.

Local preservationists and county planners, concerned that slaves' remains may be buried on the property, persuaded the Planning Commission in June to postpone a vote on the project until an independent surveyor could determine whether the previous builder—HC Land Co.—had done enough to sur-

vey the land for historic artifacts.

On Wednesday, the commission and the county's planning staff said they were satisfied that the developer had taken enough precautions to protect potential artifacts. An archaeologist would be on the site when construction began. Richmond American Homes also had reduced to 206 from 235 the number of homes it would build, increased the lot sizes and proposed an additional conservation easement to a 50-foot buffer to protect the property.

Attorney Jay du Von, who represents Richmond American Homes, said his client is considering whether to amend the Saratoga Hunt application to propose fewer homes, which would result in putting fewer cars onto Minnieville Road. But he said residents and planners over-estimated rush-hour congestion on the road.

"People should drive it at rush hour," du Von, who lives in Woodbridge, said. "The traffic moves quite well."

He also said the commission was unfair to block his project when the state controls road building. "We can't somehow place a roadblock in front of someone and say you have to wait until the state does something."

In other business, the commission voted unanimously to allow a 66-acre site off Bacon Race Road near the Occoquan Reservoir to be rezoned for 28 homes.

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