

Potomac News

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Study extension gives Bel Air life

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Development of 130 acres surrounding the historic plantation home Bel Air in Dale City won't come to fruition — for now.

The Prince William County Planning Commission Wednesday deferred a decision to allow rezoning for Saratoga Hunt, a development of 235 single family homes, that would touch the 1740s property where Parson Weems lived and is believed to be buried.

Following outcries during a public hearing from history buffs and nearby Silverdale residents, the commission called upon the applicant, H.C. Land Company, to extend its archae-

ological studies of the proposed site.

Phase I archeological studies previously performed on the property, located on the north side of Minnieville Road and less than a mile east of Silverdale Drive, unearthed two unmarked graves.

Speculation that the bodies could be slaves from the property's original owners, the Ewell family, has led some people to believe much more untold history lies beneath the surface.

"This area has a long history involving slaves, land owners and national figures," said Commissioner Thomas G. Raseta, Coles District. "It's

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better to go a little slower and look at all that's involved. Once the bulldozers roll through there, you can't reverse the process."

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the brick farmhouse of Bel Air was built in 1740 and was the original home of the Ewell family. Mason Locke Weems, a clergyman who lived from 1759 to 1825, married into the family and lived at the 1,600-acre plantation farmhouse from 1809 until his death.

Weems was the first biographer of George Washington and inventor of the popular story of the hatchet and the cherry tree, according to The Virginia Landmarks Register documentation.

Owned by brother and sister William E.S. Flory and Anne R.F. Naedele, 22 acres of the 225-acre property provide a historic easement surrounding the house, protecting it from future development. Both Flory and Naedele offered support for development of the 130 acres they would sell to H.C. Land Company.

The Flory family purchased the property in 1948 with the

idea of cultivating the land for apple and peach orchards.

"It had been abandoned for 30 years and my parents spent the rest of their lives restoring it," Flory said.

In the motion to defer, commissioners also directed developers to reconfigure the subdivision, placing one dwelling

per acre, the lowest possible density allowed in the county's 1998 Comprehensive Plan for environmentally sensitive areas.

H.C. Land Company proposed 10,000-square-foot lots with 2.4 dwellings per acre.

"The bottom line is that the revised density of 235 houses — is too much for this special place in Prince William County," said David A. Brickley, in a letter to county Supervisor Mary K. Hill.

Brickley owns property adjacent to Bel Air which also adjoins the historic easement.

The commission will address the rezoning issue at its Sept. 20 meeting.