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Board approves construction near Bel Air plantation after much debate

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MEDIA GENERAL NEWS SERVICE

PRINCE WILLIAM

It took five votes and a lot of grief but the Prince William Board of County Supervisors approved construction of a 155-home community near historic Bel Air plantation Tuesday night.

Approval for the Saratoga Hunt subdivision was granted despite concerns among supervisors regarding increased traffic jams along the southern portion of Minnieville Road south of Dale City.

The final 6-2 vote came in the early morning hours Wednesday following consecutive tie votes during a failed attempt to send the project back to the Planning Commission for more revisions.

Supervisor Mary Hill, R-Coles, said the developers had made too many concessions to simply deny the case, but wanted it sent back to county planners in hope of finding traffic solutions along the two-lane road between Silverdale and Cardinal Drive.

The impasse was broken when Supervisor Chairman Sean Connaughton, R-at large, reluctantly threw his support behind the proposal. The move was joined by Supervisor Maureen Caddigan, R-Dumfries, who

had also voted to send the case back to the Planning Commission.

Division among supervisors was reflected among the more than 50 residents who were equally split during a three-hour hearing on the topic.

Complaints came from neighbors who wanted the project scaled down with less homes, and from those worried that the historical integrity of the 18th century home would be diminished.

Built in the 1740's, Bel Air was once owned by George Washington's biographer, Parson Weems, and some believe Washington spent part of his honeymoon at the home.

Saratoga Hunt developers agreed to a 22-acre buffer around the plantation house and reduced the number of homes on the 135-acre parcel from 235 to 155. The proposal also includes more than \$2 million in proffers which will be used to pay for schools, roads and park needs.

"I'm reluctant to recommend denial," Hill said during debate over the project. "We encourage developers to be responsive to the community and this has gotten one thousand percent better because of that."

Rejecting the project after the applicant had worked so closely with neighboring residents, Hill said, would have sent a negative message to

other developers who would be less inclined to make compromises in the future.

Hill proposed sending it back to the Planning Commission to work on getting a traffic signal near the community's entrance and so county staffers could inventory proffer funds along the Minnieville corridor to see if there was enough money to accelerate the widening of Minnieville Road.

Widening that section of the road, which is not in the state's future highway plans, will cost around \$3.5 million.

Hill's motion ended with a 4-4 split and a substitute motion by Supervisor Ed Wilbourn, R-Gainesville, to approve the project also ended in a tie.

Supervisor John Jenkins, D-Neabsco, said denying the rezoning would open the county to a lawsuit for depriving the owners the same rights granted to neighboring

property owners who developed similar housing communities on adjacent property.

"There's absolutely no way we can defend this in court," Jenkins said. "That is what's going to happen. The applicant will take us to court and they will win."

With tie votes threatening to kill the project, Connaughton stepped in and supported a motion by Wilbourn to reconsider approving the Saratoga Hunt request.

"I'm going to support this because the applicant has come back with provisions to address a number of important issues," a resigned Connaughton said prior to changing his vote.

Hill and Supervisor Ruth Griggs, R-Occoquan, voted against approval during the final vote.

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