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## Historic area gets reprieve

By TARA SLATE DONALDSON

Journal staff writer

The historic area surrounding Bel Air mansion in Dale City was given a three-month reprieve Wednesday night, when the Prince William Planning Commission voted unanimously to postpone approval of the proposed Saratoga Hunt subdivision until September.

A standing-room-only crowd packed the McCoart building for the public hearing, where 29 area residents weighed in on a rezoning proposal that would allow HC Land Co. L.C. to build 235 homes on 130.2 acres between Minnieville Road and Silverdale Drive in the Coles District.

The existing agricultural zoning requires houses to be built on 10-acre lots. The developer has asked to rezone the property as suburban residential, which allows lots as small as 10,000 square feet.

The land in question was once part of the Bel Air plantation, which operated in the 18th and 19th centuries. The 14-room Bel Air mansion was built in 1740 by its first occupant, Capt. Charles Ewell, who was married to a close relative of President George Washington's mother.

Critics of the proposal, including the Prince William Historical Commission, have alleged that Firebird Archaeological Associates of Woodstock, the archaeological firm hired by the developer, did not conduct a thorough study of the area.

Two graves, one of an adult buried with a piece of quartz crystal, and one of a child, were found on the property recently. The developer has agreed to protect the sites, but many speakers suggested that a more complete archaeological survey may uncover evidence of additional graves, slave cabins or other buildings.

The concerns led Coles District Commissioner Thomas Raseta to ask the Commission to put off the vote until the archaeologist's work could be reviewed and approved by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

"It's better to go a little bit slower and really take a look at the ramifications," he said. "There seems to be a reasonably logical question in my mind that there may be something else out there."

Raseta said the additional time also would be used to investigate whether the property should instead receive a lower-density zoning than suburban residential.

The property is owned by William E.S. Flory and his sister Anne Naedele. Their parents purchased the estate in 1948 and donated 22 acres to the Department of Historic Resources in 1988 as an historic easement.

Naedele and her husband, who live in the Bel Air mansion, were among six speakers who supported the sale. Naedele said that while she appreciates the public's concern about the plantation, no public group has offered to contribute to the cost of restoring the mansion and the outlying property must now be sold to help offset the cost of upkeep.

But the proposal's supporters, which also included two churches adjacent to the site, were greatly outnumbered by its critics. Twenty-one people spoke out against the subdivision, citing already-clogged roads and overcrowded schools, in addition to concerns about the loss of an historic site.

Speaking against the proposal, Jan Cunard, the Historical Commission's Coles District member, told of the legend that the ghosts of the Ewell family still dance all night whenever a descendent dies.

"If you approve this rezoning tonight, there will be no dancing in the house by these ghosts," she said. "They will instead be turning over in their graves wondering how you



could possibly be allowing the remaining bulk of their historic plantation to fall under a developer's bulldozer."

The Planning Commission will consider the revised proposal during its Sept. 20 meeting.

In other business Wednesday, the Commission voted 4-3 to recommend approval of a Comprehensive Plan amendment that would redesignate 51 acres in the Gainesville District from semi-rural residential, which requires 2.5-acre lots, to suburban residential low, which allows one to four homes per acre.

Commissioners Bruce Holley of Neabsco, Frederick Penar of Gainesville and Geoffery Swanberg of Occoquan opposed the measure.

The land is now a horse farm but is surrounded by property planned for higher-density development.

Although there was little discussion during the public hearing, Holley said he would rather defer the amendment, adding that he did not think the Comprehensive Plan should be changed.

"That smacks of spot zoning and I would rather keep my Comprehensive Plan exactly as it is now," he said.



Last month, Holley voted in favor of a controversial Comprehensive Plan amendment that allows the expansion of the 3,130-unit Braemar development in the Brentsville District.

The Commission also voted unanimously to recommend approval of a Comprehensive Plan amendment regarding the Route 1/Route 123 Sector Plan, which calls for building with a 19th-century theme when the Woodbridge tract is redeveloped after the widening of Route 1.

The vote came after a section in the plan that requires all public utilities lines to be buried was amended to instead encourage the lines to be buried.

The amendment was made after the Commission determined that there is no accurate estimate as to how much the measure would cost.

The Commission also postponed discussion on the Dale City Residential Planned Community until September. According to Commissioner Billy Isbell, the Woodbridge District representative, the rezoning request will be "drastically restructured" before it returns to the Commission Sept. 20.

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