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Officials Seek Disney Vow Not to Secede

5 County Planners Threaten a No Vote

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Five of eight Prince William County planning commissioners said yesterday that they would vote against the Walt Disney Co.'s proposed theme park near Haymarket unless the company pledges not to secede from the county and become part of an independent city.

The annexation threat, and the loss of county taxing power that would result from the \$650 million planned park and real estate development, emerged as the first potential "deal-breaker" after eight months of zoning deliberations between Disney and county planners. The hitch comes in the last days of largely behind-the-scenes talks, with commissioners set to vote in two weeks.

Planning commissioners, at a six-hour-plus work session with Disney officials, yesterday cited a precedent in Disney's practice in Florida, where the state legislature authorized it to create a special taxing district for its 30,000-acre Walt Disney World operation near Orlando. The company virtually carved out its own government.

Under Virginia law, independent cities have unusually broad authority and are not part of adjacent counties. Similar moves in the 1970s led to the incorporation of Manassas and Manassas Park in the county, which cost Prince William its county seat and largest businesses. County officials said they are especially worried because Disney's 3,000-acre site borders the town of Haymarket, population about 450, which could

DISNEY, From B1

initiate a move to annex the theme park and its surrounding development.

"I'm gravely concerned," Commissioner Donald Poe (At-Large) said. Poe said the effect of Disney's planned development, which include a park, 2,281 houses, 1,340 hotel rooms and 1.9 million square feet of office and shopping, would go on "forever."

"What you're asking for is permission to build this theme park, all the retail facilities, all the residential facilities," Commissioner Frank Milligan (Occoquan) said. "But we need to know we're getting the bang for the buck to take all risk of letting all this traffic and all those people in. Otherwise, why in the world would we want to do this?"

County officials project \$12 million in tax benefits from the Disney project in 1998, growing to \$29 million by 2010. Critics have said it will generate as little as \$1.5 million in tax benefits annually.

Dana Nottingham, real estate director for Disney's America, refused

to say the company would never seek annexation, citing the potential tax savings.

"We have no intention of seeking de-annexation or creating a special district . . . but we can't [promise] we will never pursue that option," he said. "There may be conditions beyond the power of any person in this room."

Nottingham said he would consider a pledge lasting as long as 20 years, but even that would require clearance from senior Disney executives.

A majority of Prince William planning commissioners said that would not be long enough, since the project is not slated to be fully built until 2010.

County planning commissioners scheduled a final public negotiating session with Disney for Sept. 7, three days before it has set a public hearing and vote. The Prince William Board of County Supervisors can disregard the planning commission's vote, but a negative recommendation could pose an unexpected political obstacle.

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My Father Sold The Farm, * Not My Heritage

On July 30, I and some members of my family visited Haymarket to participate in a commemorative celebration of the time that the Marquis de Lafayette stopped in that little town on a triumphal visit.

The Revolutionary War hero received a hero's welcome in 1825 as he traversed Virginia with former president James Monroe on the way to Monroe's home near Leesburg, where he was to stay for an extended visit.

Lafayette's visit was particularly significant to me, because my great-great-grandmother, who was pregnant at the time of the marquis's visit, was to name her child Winston Lafayette Carter. When grown, Winston Lafayette married Maria Nelson and together they farmed Erindale farm. The 269-acre Erindale adjoins Waverly and Mill Park "plantations" and is significant today because it is part of the land parcel that may be developed for Disney's America.

At age 36, my great-grandfather enlisted as a lieutenant in a Virginia infantry regiment—part of Robert E. Lee's forces. Thirteen months later, he died in the Battle of Williamsburg, and Erindale was sacked by the "brothers-in-blue."

After the war, his widow could not maintain the farm, and it left the family, but in 1923 my father—also named Winston Lafayette—and his brother bought the farm at auction, and it became our home again until World War II.

After the Lafayette celebration, my family and I drove out for one last look at the old property. All the buildings were gone, although two massive stone chimneys were still standing. One chimney dated to the 1700s; the other was rebuilt in 1931 after the original collapsed. As a 10-year-old, I had watched every stone of that chimney being put into place.

Our house had been massive, made of logs covered on the outside by clapboard and on the inside by lath and plaster. It was an eerie feeling that day to stand waist deep in weeds and realize that I was standing just where our parlor had been.

The log smokehouse with the carved pineapple symbol of hospitality was gone. So was the carriage house, which had had an ice house underneath. The long, stone-backed building that had been the quarters for servants or slaves upstairs and for cattle below was gone too, but I could see the rise in the center of the 30-acre field behind the house where the bones of departed slaves lie. Once marked with rough mountain stones, it had been plowed over.

A corner post still marked the location of my father's immaculate garden, but it was harder to place the location of the tennis and croquet courts that we used extensively during the Depression years, when we turned the farm into a summer camp.

I felt a tremendous sense of relief at not seeing a collapsed house or outbuildings. The chimneys seemed to be a fitting form of gravestone.

We fought our way through chest-high growth to find the spring at the bottom of the hill, and I waded in Catharpin Run at the ford near where we had swum as children. I dipped my hat into the sweet water and poured it over my head.

My brother, Robert, and his wife have done extensive genealogical research and have copies of letters from Confederate Lt. Carter asking that food be sent from the farm with Jimmy (our grandfather) or with one of the servants to help feed his troops encamped near Nokesville. War was a family thing then. My great-grandfather even sent his laundry home to be done.

I have no "ownership" right to tell anyone what to do with Erindale or the adjoining Waverly Plantation, where I worked as a teenager. My father sold the farm many years ago while his three sons were in the service—and he was paid for it.

I feel that I do have the right—and indeed the obligation to speak out in defense of our country's heritage.

I take no pride in having grown up on a farm that had once been tilled by slaves. But all of my great-grandfather's letters referred to the "servants" or the "hands" and, indeed, Carter ancestors for several generations prior to him had grown to abhor slavery. And it was a wise man who said that those who don't learn from their mistakes are doomed to repeat them.

Gen. Lafayette helped us conceive a nation in 1776, but our Civil War was the real birth of the United States—albeit a painful and costly birth. The ground where this birth occurred is hallowed ground. It is no place for an amusement park or a theme park. Disney should look elsewhere.

—Edward Nelson Carter