

Sisters guard last of land as developers fight for sites

By GIDGET FUENTES
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As the Order of St. Benedictine nears closing on its final sale, the provider of large chunks of land for development finds itself fending off encroaching homes and townhouses.

The Richmond-based order once held more than 1,800 acres of rolling fields in the county, most of it farmland of what is now the developing Linton Hall area. Now, it tightly hangs onto the 120 acres that is home to the convent and private school.

The order has lent its name to an application for a rezoning request by Richmarr Construction Corp. on a small commercial area for the Pembroke residential subdivision.

The planned rerouting of the Sudley Manor Drive extension would run through the eastern fringe of their property on Linton Hall Road. The road extension is vital to Richmarr's large Pembroke development which surrounds the order's home.

County approval of the plan has been delayed until November. If approved, the sisters expect Richmarr to buy the 28-acre parcel.

When the deed is signed, the sisters hope to semi-retire from the land-dealing business.

"We have no [further] plans to develop," said Sister Cecelia.

"I think we have enough land around us to preserve the privacy and the kind of campus we want," she said.

Such a partnership, they say, is vital to the order's survival.

Faced with growing medical bills for the care of its aging members,

the order needed a source of funds. They found it in developers and investors eager to buy their land.

Sister Cecelia, proprietress of the convent and the sister-run Linton Hall School, admits the order held a key to the growth of the Linton Hall area, which is under the control of developers, county planners and local residents.

"Definitely our land sales started the whole Linton Hall development," she said. "The neighbors are being offered money for their land they never could dream of."

Fewer residents at planning commission meetings have complained of developments, she noted.

The sale of the order's lands over the last few years has touched off a selling spree as the county's rural pastureland has become lucrative for owners and investors alike.

Over the past three years, the order netted nearly \$3 million from the sale of about 1,212 acres. The money has gone into a fund to help defray the costs of medical care for the sisters, many of whom are in their 80s. "It's kind of like a pension fund," she said.

"We were very lucky, very fortunate to have that land," Sister Cecelia said.

The Linton Hall School, which the order's sisters are pledged to serve, will undoubtedly benefit from the numerous residential subdivisions planned in the Linton Hall area. "We'd have more of an area to serve," noted Sister Cecelia.

Those prospects are delighting the sisters, who have revamped the former military school into a coed private academy. Last year's school enrollment doubled to 70 students, including one girl.

"It's really becoming the school we always wanted it to be," she said. "I'm really pleased with the direction it's going."

From the stone and brick enclave, Sister Cecelia keeps a constant eye on the neighbors, including Richmarr's development. "As far as

I can see, it's not too close," she observed.

One concern of hers is whether any commercial development, such as a small shopping center, will be built near, or in sight of, the campus. "It's not a place for kids to go," she noted.



Steve Mawyer/Journal

Proprietress Sister Cecilia Dwyer of Linton Hall Convent.