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They have seen the future of western Prince William County, and it looks like this: quaint town centers with high-end shops, and shaded gravel exercise and nature trails next to low-density communities dotted with lush open space and modest office complexes.

A key component of this balanced utopia is a swath of land in a largely African American neighborhood known as "the **Settlement**," where some black families can trace their lineage back 150 years. There, an influential slow-growth group envisioned an "African American Heritage Park," a wooded patch where no future development would be permitted so that the area's rich history can be preserved.

The group came up with the plan to control development in and around the county's **Gainesville** district and prevent any Tysons Corner-like buildup.

But in hatching their dream, the members of the all-white group – who call their 30-page document the Residents' Plan – never consulted the approximately three dozen black families who for years have lived on the 383 acres, angering many who see the plan as an infringement on their property rights.

Even now, as slow-growth activists back away from calling the land a heritage park and have removed some of the more objectionable plans for the property, the residents – who activists thought would be on their side because of the historical angle – have vowed to derail any attempts to limit what could be built there.

"They called it a Residents' Plan, but they never consulted any of these residents," said Pat Lightfoot, who owns six acres in the heart of what would have been the heritage park. "Black families have lived here for more than a hundred years, and we don't need people suggesting how our land should be bought and sold."

At its core, the debate that has erupted in the shadow of Bull Run Mountain is a disagreement over a proposal to alter a largely black community in hopes of slowing the rapid development of that part of Prince William. The slow-growth plan is an alternative to a proposal by another residents' group that had been asked by the county to visualize what **Gainesville** should look like in 10 years. Their picture added 6.1 million square feet of retail space and 5,300 houses.

Both groups' plans will be considered by the Planning Commission early next year.

The activists who drew up the Residents' Plan, members of local environmental groups, hope to build upon their 1998 success: an 80,000-acre rural preserve. The heritage park, they say, seemed to be a benign way of doing that.

"We're trying to create a livable community here," said Martha Hendley. "The park would have been a part of that balanced plan."

But for the black property owners, the issue of heritage is not necessarily one of preservation. Instead, it is self-determination to buy and sell their land – particularly because many of them were prevented from buying property anywhere else in the county as recently as 30 years ago.

"If we choose as individuals to sell our land, we have earned that right," said Conchita Shorts, whose family has owned land in the area for more than a century. "This was the only place that black people could buy land for years, and it should be our decision if we want to sell it when we feel it's time."

For years, planners have considered **Gainesville** one of the last frontiers for major development because of its proximity to the key intersection of Interstate 66 and Route 29. So in January 2000, the 12-member Citizen's Advisory Committee began to chart a future for the area. By last March, the commission had come up with a document calling for thousands of residential units, enough retail space for three Tysons I and II malls, and nearly 16 million square feet of office space.

But Hendley and members of environmental and slow-growth groups worried that the plan called for too much development. They offered their own vision, which included half the number of residential units, one-fifth of the retail space, and more than 800 acres of parkland and open space.

"Our phrase is 'Don't Tysons **Gainesville**,'" said Hendley, who has lived on 25 acres in **Gainesville** since 1984.

They saw **the Settlement** as a perfect place for a park to serve as a buffer between an existing subdivision to the east and protected woodland to the west. To ensure that land was not sold to private developers, residents would have been required to offer their land to the county first, but as "in-dwellers" they would be allowed to bequeath property.

Without **the Settlement** land, Hendley's group does not have a crucial element of its plan: parkland. Hendley said she is still hoping to negotiate with members of **the Settlement** and so far has no alternative.

There is much history between the poplars and the oaks. Several free black communities sprouted there in the early 19th century, and the site became one of the few in the area where blacks developed their own schools and businesses. After the Civil War, a vibrant community continued as former slaves slowly acquired land from former slave owners. During much of the 20th century, it was one of the only places in the county where blacks could buy land, according to historians.

"We thought this would be a perfect opportunity to commemorate the African American heritage that is so unique," said Hendley. She added that her group invited selected members of the black community to discuss the plan, albeit after it had been developed. Her group never intended to "disenfranchise" the residents, she said.

But for many of the black families, the tradition they hope to preserve is the ability to buy and sell land without interference. Many had sold to other black families, some to whites. And although several landowners said they had no immediate plan to sell, others said they had no interest in keeping the land in their families, so the stipulation that they could hand down the property became irrelevant.

Now, many of the families living in the area that stretches from Route 29 to Route 15 along Thoroughfare and Carver roads hope to come up with a plan to protect their property rights.

"We want to make sure that we have a say in what happens here," Lightfoot said.

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