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CWPT & Developer Join Forces At Bristoe Station

By Deborah Fitts May '02 issue

PRINCE WILLIAM County, Va. -- County officials, preservationists and developers alike are hailing an unusual land-planning outcome that preserves a portion of a battlefield while at the same time allowing significant development to proceed.

The Prince William county supervisors on March 19 unanimously approved a 341-acre project on the Bristoe Station battlefield south of Manassas that sets aside 127 acres as a permanent battlefield park. The other 214 acres will comprise "New Bristow Village," 520 homes and a commercial area designed to resemble a 19th-century village.

Here in October 1863 Confederate forces suffered a bloody defeat when they were caught in the flank as they attempted to cross Broad Run in pursuit of the Federal Third Corps. The drubbing brought to an early close Robert E. Lee's first major offensive since Gettysburg, and the Southern army withdrew south of the Rapidan River.

The deal calls for developer Centex Homes to donate the 127 acres to the nonprofit Civil War Preservation Trust for the park.

Jim Burgess, vice chairman of the Prince William County Historical Commission and a museum specialist at Manassas National Battlefield Park, said the park land will comprise only about one-quarter of the battlefield, "but it certainly is the area that saw the heaviest fighting."

Jim Campi, spokesman for the Trust, said Centex has agreed to fund an interpretive trail through the park, plus wayside signs. The property, to be dubbed Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park, has as its "centerpiece" a hill where five Confederate artillery pieces were captured when charging Feder-als overran Southern lines.

"It's going to be a great little park," said Campi.

The interpretive signs will address the entire battle, he noted, including land not part of the Centex property.

The deal was struck when Centex approached Trust President Jim Lighthizer. Lighthizer called "truly remarkable" the developer's willingness to donate the core of the battlefield.

County officials expressed delight that virtually all parties emerged satisfied, and lengthy litigation was avoided.

Burgess said concerns remain about possible wartime graves on the portion of the property that will be developed. The battlefield park will protect a cemetery of the 10th Alabama Infantry created during an encampment in the summer and early fall of 1861.

A recent thermal imaging survey funded by the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) suggests there may be "mass burial trenches" south of the cemetery and also within the 127 acres, Burgess said, but that is uncertain. Centex has agreed to allow 120 days to survey for graves.

The Virginia SCV has stepped forward to provide funding, as well as the Piedmont Environmental Council, Save the Battlefield Coalition, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and even the chairman of the Board of Supervisors.

Ed Wenzel of Save the Battlefield Coalition said Centex's "willingness to work with the planning staff and protect the Civil War heritage of Prince William County deserves the highest praise." Given Centex's willingness to allow for exploration for graves, Burgess said he was "generally satisfied" with the outcome.

Others, including local battlefield supporter Bobby McManus and preservationist and reenactor Rob Hodge, "took the moral high ground and opposed any development," Burgess said. "But this represents probably the best and only opportunity we have to save any of the Bristoe Station battlefield," he said.

"It was a pragmatic position. The next developer may not be so generous."

Campi said a "Civil War-era fence" and two rows of trees will help to screen the park from the adjoining development. A permanent conservation easement, held by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, will be placed on the park.

The Trust already owns several battlefield parks, including Cedar Mountain, Brandy Station and Malvern Hill. "It's something we try to avoid," Campi said. "We prefer to utilize our resources in buying land."

Campi said the trust would also have preferred that all of the battlefield be saved, "but it was just not in the cards. But we hope the park will provide the momentum to preserve other key elements of the battlefield that are not part of this."

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