

"Federation Corner" column
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Police station and housing proposed for White Oak site

by Elizabeth Molloy, President, Sherbrooke Homeowners Association
and Barry Wides, President, North White Oak Civic Association

The Montgomery county government has filed a Mandatory Referral with the Planning Board proposing to move the Third District Police Station from downtown Silver Spring to 4 acres of a 13 acre wooded parcel on Milestone Drive, which is located in the northeast quadrant of the intersection of Columbia Pike and New Hampshire Avenue.

Although the White Oak Master Plan identifies this property as being zoned R-90/TDR (transferable development rights) with a recommended density of six dwelling units per acre, the County is proposing to squeeze both the police station and as many as 175 units of affordable housing (either workforce income level townhouses or affordable rental units) onto the site. Despite a request from local communities to present the County's dual purpose plan at the same time, so that the consequences of both proposals could be considered simultaneously, the County maintains the two uses cannot be reviewed at the same time because the housing plan is about a year behind the police station plan in development. We believe that the whole picture-including both uses-should be examined together.

If taken together, the dual use proposal will result in the unnecessary clear-cutting of nearly all of this ecologically sensitive forested area that is situated less than one-half mile from the Paint Branch. We are presenting an alternative which would provide for 100% of the forest conservation required for the police station project to be done on-site, resulting in a significant expansion of the proposed forest conservation area.

The County claims that the forest on the site is "not worth saving." They claim that, except for a few significant trees, the stand is mostly invasive species. Their solution is to remove all but about nine trees from the 13 acres, as part of the plan for the police station project. We oppose this plan as it will result in significant stormwater and sediment runoff, particularly from the part of the property which is being saved for future county land needs. We are also concerned that the current proposal would allow more than 2 acres of the required forest conservation to be done off-site. The forest already exists onsite. Its needless destruction will not only damage but will stand in direct contradiction of the plan's claim to be "green".

In addition to our having drafted an alternative plan for the police station portion of the site that will allow for more forest conservation, the Sherbrooke Homeowners Association and the North White Oak Civic Association have raised a number of other points about the development proposal.

We are very concerned that the planned police station is located so close to existing homes and without an adequate buffer between the two different land uses. In some places the fence surrounding the police station is less than 30 feet from adjoining homes, and the fence is literally right on the property lines of these homes. If this construction were subject to Park and Planning "compatibility" rules, a much larger buffer would be required in order for a developer to obtain approval to build a 40-foot tall commercial building immediately next to single family detached homes in an R-90 zoned residential neighborhood.

As an alternative to this proposal, our civic associations have proposed that the police station be moved 200 feet away from existing homes and closer to the intersection of Columbia Pike and Stewart Lane. By moving the police station away from neighboring homes, the county could accommodate all the forest conservation on-site as well as create an additional 4 acre forest preservation area. This is a very sensible approach which maximizes the County's goal of forest conservation while simultaneously providing the necessary buffer between the police station and adjoining residences

Our civic associations propose that this forest preservation area be dedicated to the memory of Rachel Carson who wrote Silent Spring while living in the nearby Quaint Acres community. Our proposal also recommends the establishment of a privately-funded educational exhibit about Rachel Carson at the nearby White Oak Library, and a self-guided walking tour proceeding from the library through the forested portion of the police station site to the Rachel Carson home in Quaint Acres, then on to the Rachel Carson Greenway in nearby Northwest Branch Park.

We will be presenting our alternative plan at the Civic Federation's February 8 meeting at which we will be seeking approval of a resolution in support of our proposal. We look forward to seeing you at the meeting.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net