

Arundel Report

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Open space bill draws ire from residents

Legislation up for hearing tomorrow

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Allowed on open space land in Anne Arundel County: ice rinks and swimming pools.

Not allowed: lacrosse, soccer or any other field sport.

To County Councilman Jamie Benoit, that makes no sense. It also prevents the Boys & Girls Club and the Y of Central Maryland from using a west county property for ath-

letics.

The land in question was rezoned open space last year, shutting out the organizations.

So the Crownsville Democrat introduced a bill that would permit recreational uses — including ball fields — on open spaces.

"In open space, as long as the sport takes place on ice or in the water, you're allowed to do it," Benoit said. "If it's on the ground, you're not. Frankly, it's stupid."

But his legislation, scheduled for a hearing tomorrow night, has angered residents of an Annapolis neighborhood who are fighting

plans to develop the historic Annapolis Golf Course.

Last fall, the Key School announced plans to buy the course in Annapolis Roads and build ball fields and outdoor classrooms there. Annapolis Roads residents, concerned about traffic and noise, fought back by filing a lawsuit in county Circuit Court.

That lawsuit is pending. The residents, though, cheered an opinion issued last month by county Planning and Zoning Director Larry Tom, which declared open space land like the golf course off-limits for recreational uses. That includes

ball fields, Tom wrote.

When that opinion came out, "we all breathed a sigh of relief," said Angus Phillips, vice president of the Annapolis Roads Property Owners Association.

And then about 12 hours later, Phillips said, they learned of Benoit's bill. If it passes, doesn't that mean ball fields will be allowed at the golf course and the Key School can proceed with its plans?

He said dozens of Annapolis Roads residents are expected to line up to testify against the bill at tomorrow's hearing.

"I think most people in the community do not want to have Key

School athletics here," Phillips said.

The property in west county is a 16-acre plot of land behind the Village South at Waugh Chapel. The Y of Central Maryland and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County want to build a sports field complex there, plus a full-service family center, said Gene Oaksmith, vice president of strategic development for the Y.

Steve Conyer, the former president of the Crofton Athletic Council, said ball fields are sorely needed in west county.

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More kids than fields

Land owner Millersville-based Reliable Contracting Co. partnered with the organizations with the intent that they would use it for recreation, Conyer said.

"We have more kids than fields," Conyer said. "What is open space? You can build a building there, but not fields?"

Not all children want to play indoor sports, he said. There needs to be outdoor facilities, too.

Conyer said he understands the concerns of Annapolis Roads residents.

"They just want things to stay the way they are. I feel for them," he said.

Some Annapolis Roads residents have taken shots at Benoit, saying he introduced the bill as a form of retaliation against residents for not supporting a 2009 proposal to annex the golf course to the city of Annapolis.

They also claim Benoit's motivated by a friendship with John Stamato, president of Ribera Development who's named in the Annapolis Roads suit. Ri-

bera tried to purchase the golf course in 2005 when St. Mary's School wanted to build athletic fields there. Residents protested, and Ribera eventually sued Annapolis Roads property owners.

Benoit, while acknowledging that Stamato once contributed \$500 to his election campaign, waved away the allegations.

"I would love nothing more than to save that golf course," said Benoit, an avid golfer who serves on the course panel for *Golf Digest* magazine. "The community has shown they have no interest."

Benoit suggested that even if his bill doesn't pass, the Key School has other ways to develop the property.

Tom, the Planning and Zoning director, said he's not sure about that. But he pointed that there are examples of golf courses with athletic fields and other recreational accessory uses.

"There's precedent for it," Tom said. "If it came to that, we'd have to look at it."

He said he'd rather see the county take a more comprehensive look at open space laws, an sentiment echoed by County Councilman Chris Trumbauer, D-Annapolis.

Trumbauer, who represents the area including Annapolis Roads, said he's

gotten dozens of calls from people concerned about what the bill could do to open space.

"A lot are from the Annapolis Roads community, but not all of them."

Key School determined

Irfan Latimer, a Key School spokeswoman, said the school remains enthusiastic about the golf course.

She said Benoit's legislation would serve to clarify some ambiguous language in the county's open space laws.

"I think it would be good for all of the county," Latimer said.

Or it could have the opposite effect, said Jake Vandergrift, president of the Annapolis Roads Property Owners Association.

He said he's saddened by the battle over open space and wonders where the county could ultimately draw the line.

"When you have the space, the next thing you know, a stadium goes in," Vandergrift said. "Developers are always looking for more ways to do things. I hope the council understands that."

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