

Board Vows More Precise Budget Talks With Council

Clarksburg Project Prompts New Tactic

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Stung by critics who said last year that the county's planning board failed to properly monitor development at Clarksburg Town Center, the panel is taking a new approach to budgeting: telling the County Council what it really will cost to run a tighter and more effective agency.

"We have an obligation to tell the council what is needed," said new Chairman Royce Hanson, who took over the beleaguered Department of Park and Planning in July after former chairman Derick P. Berlage decided against seeking reappointment after a stormy year.

Berlage, a former County Council member, was blamed for lax management of the \$100 million agency and poor oversight of development. The agency's weaknesses came to light in the past 18 months after a community group found that hundreds of homes in Clarksburg Town Center were built too tall and on lots that were too small. The group struggled to bring the irregularities to the attention of county officials.

The concerns about being honest brokers of the proposed budget

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came during a round-table discussion at last Thursday's planning board meeting. Commissioner Wendy C. Perdue, the board's vice chairman, sparked the discussion by urging her colleagues and acting Planning Director Faroll Hamer to send in an accurate wish list that would explain to the council exactly how much it would cost to step up enforcement and improve staff oversight of development.

"We have to tell them what it will cost for what we need," Perdue said. She said the panel should offer the council a series of choices. Top flight, or A-level enforcement would cost the most, B-level would cost somewhat less and C-would cost the least. Then, she said, the council can pick.

Implicit in the discussion was an attempt by the five board members to shift some of the responsibility — and the potential for political heat — directly to the council, which oversees the planning agen-

cy and approves its final budget.

"We can't overpromise," Perdue said. "We have to get in a new mind-set and tell them exactly what we need."

Commissioner Allison Bryant cautioned the group that an economic downturn was on the horizon and could affect the council's ability to allocate funds to the park and planning agency.

But he agreed the group should try.

"Historically, we have not asked for what we really need, and we

have been behind the eight ball for several years," he said.

Development review chief Rose Krasnow said her division is still struggling to hire planners for new jobs created after the discovery of irregularities at Clarksburg Town Center. She noted that the agency still only has three inspectors, who must examine building projects for compliance with plans and also enforce county laws limiting tree cutting in certain types of developments.

And one of the inspectors,

Douglas Johnsen, is a reservist who is in Iraq, reducing the inspector ranks by one-third, at least for a few months.

Other than Hanson, who is the full-time head of the Department of Park and Planning, the four other board members serve part time. Besides Bryant, Hanson and Perdue, the board members are John M. Robinson and Meredith K. Wellington. All but Bryant, a management consultant, are lawyers; Hanson also is a nationally known planner and academician.