

# Residents say Crown Farm being rushed to approval

■ Developers say they are financially bound to the June 1 deadline

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Residents who say Crown Farm annexation plans appear to be on the fast track are asking, "Why the rush?"

The 183-acre property off of Fields Road, which developers want annexed into Gaithersburg, could be the site of 2,250 homes and 320,000 square feet of commercial space, likely having a significant effect on neighboring schools and roads, residents say.

Some say they aren't convinced those issues have been adequately addressed so far and are asking member of the County Council to take a step back and regroup.

"We can't be held hostage to a developer's timeline," said Jim Humphrey of the Montgomery County Civic Federation. "Once the particulars are known, we want it to come back to the citizens of the county instead of the 'trust us' approach that's happening with the council."

Because the overall development proposal is a significant change from the county master plan, the County Council must review and approve the zoning change before it can be annexed into Gaithersburg.

The development team, made up of KB Home and Centex Homes and led by businessman Aris Mardirossian, has said it is financially bound to a June 1 annexation. A 30- to 34-acre high school site, which the team has proposed donating to the county, could be revoked if the deadline is not met. The site is worth about \$80 million, the developer said.

Despite concerns from some decision-makers that developers have not provided enough details, the proposal has gone through its first two advisory groups — the

county Planning Board and the County Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee — in about a month.

It is scheduled to go before the County Council for approval April 25.

County Councilman Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring refutes that the process has gone too quickly. He said the county is trying to accommodate the interests of Gaithersburg, while securing a high school site that "doesn't cost taxpayers millions of dollars."

Even after several public meetings, some particulars have not yet been firmed up.

At a Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee meeting last week, county planning staff and the developer clashed over how many Transferable Development Rights, or TDRs, were designated on the property, which could amount to millions of dollars paid to the county Agricultural Reserve.

A Transferable Development Right allows a property owner whose land is part of the Agricultural Reserve to sell his development rights to owners of property in so-called receiving areas. In turn, the buyers or holders of TDRs are permitted to develop their land at a density greater than the base density of the receiving areas.

There has so far been no county attorney opinion on a possible enclave (county land surrounded by municipal land) that could be created if the annexation goes forward.

The total amount of affordable housing on the property also has not been mapped out.

Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton said annexation proposals are typically more complete before going to the council. She said the bodies are moving too fast.

"We're not talking about a lengthy process, we're talking about a deliberative process," she said. "... If there is a need to move expeditiously on this, there needs to be more

details."

But Silverman maintains that the details will be provided to the County Council in a draft agreement, and that council members will have "ample time" to look at the documentation and ask questions.

Because of a busy budget season in May, the Crown Farm needed to get on the council agenda in April or be postponed until July, Silverman said.

"No one on our staff suggested that we were lacking information to make decisions on this," he said. "... For the county, what is driving the train is securing a much needed high school site that we would otherwise not be entitled to."

Ralph Wilson, senior legislative analyst for the county, said the scheduling process for Crown Farm has been typical.

"Some people have said they think it's being rushed," Wilson said. "But that's subjective. We schedule things as a matter of course."

Activists aren't backing down. Members of the advocacy groups Common Cause Maryland, the Montgomery County Civic Federation and Neighbors for a Better Montgomery say residents should have more chances to comment once details are figured out.

"There are so many variables here," said Pam Lindstrom, who has followed county planning for 15 years. "I'm just stunned at how quickly this is moving. I'm stunned."