

Council approves farm's annexation

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The County Council on Tuesday approved Gaithersburg's request to annex the Crown Farm, the first major approval developers need to turn the rural land into a 2,250-home community.

The council set conditions that require the developers to make 12.5 percent of the housing moderately priced dwelling units and pay \$2

million to preserve farmland elsewhere in the county.

The approval, on a vote of 7-0-2, allows a change in zoning needed for a mixed-use community similar to the neighboring Kentlands and Lakelands communities.

Two council members, Marilyn J. Praisner and Philip M. Andrews, argued that the developer should make a greater commitment to preserve farmland.

Aris Mardrossian, the Gaithers-

burg businessman leading the development team, said he was pleased with the outcome that set aside money for farmers. The developers also will donate land for a school.

"We can live it," he said. "Everybody should now sit back and relax and see what the outcome will be. We will set a new standard for development in Gaithersburg. I can promise you that."

The team, which also includes KB Home, Centex Homes and real estate investor Steve Lebling, wants to build 2,250 residential units and up to 320,000 square feet of commercial space on the 183-acre parcel off Fields Road.

Because the plan proposes significantly more commercial space than envisioned under the county's master plan, the County Council had to approve the zoning change before Gaithersburg could annex it.

With the approval, the county also gained a 30-acre high school site, which could relieve overcrowding at six of the area's secondary schools. It is worth about \$40 million, the school system said, but other estimates have placed a higher value on the land.

A major sticking point for the County Council was the requirement of moderately priced dwelling units on the property, a long-time affordable housing program aimed at people earning 50 percent to 80 percent of the area's median income.

Gaithersburg officials are mulling over their own affordable housing program but, so far, no details have been hashed out.

Gaithersburg will manage Crown Farm's MPDU program, council members said, but it must fit the long-time criteria of the county, including the same qualifying income levels and amount of time the homes must stay affordable. Gaithersburg may give some priority to city residents or workers.

The council also avoided a muddled attempt to determine the number of transferable development rights on the property in lieu of a \$2 million developer donation to a county agricultural easement program.

A transferable development right allows a property owner in the agricultural reserve to sell rights to developers who want to build hous-

es in more urban areas, away from farmland.

Previous estimates on Crown Farm counted as many as 282 TDRs on the site, which dwindled to about zero to 94 TDRs after county research on Tuesday.

The majority of council members deemed the count too inaccurate and complex to require, and said farmers would continue to benefit from money contributed to a farmland easement plan.

Praisner said abandoning the TDRs showed a lack of commitment to the program.

Last week Gaithersburg's Planning Commission also recommended annexation of the property to the mayor and City Council.

Chair John Bauer called the potential annexation "an opportunity to further bolster well planned, well executed neighborhoods in Gaithersburg."

"We know how to do that," he added.

The plan is scheduled to come before a mayor and City Council work session Monday night.

The developer has said he is financially bound to an annexation by June 1.