

## County Plan for Home Draws Fire

*Neighbors Oppose Effort to House Needy Near Bethesda Park*

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As the Montgomery County Council put the finishing touches on a \$2.5 million plan to buy more land for a Bethesda park, council member Nancy Floreen lobbed what has turned out to be the equivalent of a neighborhood cluster bomb:

Why not house a needy family in the 1930s-era home on the property in the Hillmead neighborhood and expand the park at the same time?

The planning board chairman wasn't eager. His agency has 77 park houses, the majority rented to

county employees or the public, and only a few were group homes. But Floreen (D-At Large), joined by other council members, persisted. Now the county's housing agency is trying to decide whether the house is suitable for a 14-member homeless family living in a local motel.

Residents of Hillmead, a leafy community about three miles from downtown Bethesda with small Cape Cods and large McMansions selling for more than \$1 million, say they only recently learned of the county's plans and think officials did a poor job

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## Residents Oppose Montgomery Plan for House

of keeping them informed.

So they are doing what many neighborhoods in the Washington region have learned to do so well: launch a sophisticated campaign to battle local leaders.

The dispute comes at a time of renewed attention to the county's affordable housing program. County officials say it is among their highest priorities, although it has fallen short of its goals, in part because finding sites is so difficult. A task force is expected to propose significant changes to the program soon.

The Hillmead residents insist that their opposition does not stem from antipathy to poor people. Those leading the fight say it's a debate about how the county chooses to spend its \$4 billion budget in tough economic times, and about due process for communities.

"This really isn't about having a homeless family living in a house that is bigger than probably 90 percent of the houses in the neighborhood," said Brett Tularco, a developer who lives in the neighborhood and has offered to tear down the house to save the county the expense. "Our kids are going to school in trailers and then this homeless family would be living in a \$3 million estate. That money could have been spent on housing tons of people instead of one family."

He said he is also worried about public safety if the homeless family moves on and the county then uses the house to shelter mentally ill residents or drug abusers.

"That really isn't who we want our kids playing next to," he said.

In a textbook example of rapid-fire community organizing, dozens of the residents ginned up e-mail networks, peppered county officials with letters and e-mails, contacted reporters, hired a lawyer, planted "Save the Park" signs and held a "pre-meeting" to hone their message for a public session with county officials. They have made it clear that they are willing to do whatever it takes to derail the county's plans.

County officials say the debate in Hillmead is hardly unique, and it highlights the challenge they regularly face as they try to find sites for affordable housing in one of the country's most affluent and expensive counties. Officials estimate that about 1,100 residents are homeless every night in Montgomery County.

"Whenever we go into a neighborhood to provide some kind of housing, whether it is affordable for lower-income individuals or special-needs housing, it is the fear of the unknown,"



A Montgomery County plan to place a homeless family in this house has raised the ire of many in Bethesda's Hillmead community.

said Richard Y. Nelson Jr., the county's housing chief.

"Many hold the view that those who get the advantage to live in this housing are people who have their hand out, and they don't recognize that isn't necessarily true. Most would rather not be in this housing and are doing all they can to get out of it," he said.

The neighborhood's resident lawyers, real estate agent, builder and activists say that's not their view.

At a recent meeting at the Greentree shelter, a neighborhood facility for abused women and their children on a secluded site, Adriane Jons said Hillmead is a caring community.

"We are doing everything we can to get out the word that we are a compassionate neighborhood," she said. Residents say they regularly donate funds, volunteer their time and generously support an array of programs to help the county's needy. And they note that the Greentree facility is part of their community.

Their County Council member, Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda), a lawyer, sounds a similar theme. Their objection doesn't mean they don't want to help the homeless, he said.

"There has not been a process established," Berliner told more than 150 Hillmead residents who came to a recent community meeting, an extraordi-

nary turnout in the neighborhood of almost 300 homes. And in a sharply worded letter to Nelson, Berliner said the county had been "counterproductive and disrespectful of the community's understandable desire to be a partner in the process."

Council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) isn't buying it.

"Every neighborhood will voice objections. There is not one single neighborhood that will say, 'Yes, please house these families here.' I would hope that progressive, Democratic-elected officials would see the rhetoric about process and the obstacles being thrown in the path of doing the right thing," Leventhal said.

"I acknowledge it was not a perfect process. I take my share of the blame for that, and I am trying to reach out to the neighborhood," he said.

Two years ago, many of Hillmead's residents were untroubled by or unaware of a neighbor's plans to sell the same property, including the house, to a developer to build four upscale single-family homes. Two residents fought a mostly solitary battle to try to scuttle that plan and expand the park.

The sale of the property for development eventually fell through, and the owner offered it to the park and planning agency, which decided to buy the 1.3 acres, with the house still

standing, and add the land to the park. County officials still hope to expand the park, no matter what happens to the house, officials have said.

Only a few residents have spoken in favor of the proposal to house a needy family. Many Hillmead residents have not spoken publicly.

Bonnie Fogel, founder of the Bethesda Academy of Performing Arts, who lives nearby, said she has worked for years with children and adults with special needs and would welcome them as neighbors.

"Why can't we open our hearts a little bit?" she asked during the community meeting. And, she added, if government spending was so important to Hillmead residents, why didn't they object when the County Council voted to spend \$2.5 million to buy the land to expand the park? There was a smattering of applause.

Berliner urged residents to keep their calls and letters coming. Having an impact on government decision makers, he said at the community meeting, "is a function of a lot of people letting them know their views on this. Do I make myself clear?"

Next on the agenda: The county will determine if the house can be renovated for occupancy. In Hillmead, the rumor is flying that there is asbestos in the house.

BY SUSAN BIKEL — THE WASHINGTON POST