

Council revises its deer hunting laws

■ Unanimous vote allows urban hunts

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The County Council last week approved a new deer management bill that will loosen county deer hunting laws while aligning many regulations with state law.

The bill was passed by a vote of 7-0 on Dec. 4.

It allows deer hunting in urban areas on private properties that are at least 50 acres. It also reduces

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the safety zone for firing weapons from 200 yards to 150 yards from a home or other occupied building, as is prescribed by state law.

"The main purpose of the bill is to make the county laws regarding deer hunting more flexible," said Kathleen Boucher, senior legislative attorney for the council. "It implements the recommendations of the deer management work group. The main change is inside the urban boundary; it allows hunting on parcels 50 acres in size. That is new."

Boucher said the bill was written to address many problems related to the overpopulation of deer, including vehicle collisions and damage to crops and landscape.

County Executive Isiah Leggett has until Monday to sign the bill into law, and the law will take effect 90 days after it is signed. It has not been signed as of Tuesday, Leggett spokesman Patrick Laceyfield said.

Rob Gibbs, chairman of the county's deer management work group, said he hopes landowners in urban areas will take advantage of the bill that makes it easier for them to manage deer.

"I would not expect to see a huge surge in hunting throughout the urban parts of the county," he said. "Some landowners will take immediate advantage and others will learn about it."

Wade Butler, owner of Butler's Orchard in Germantown, said the bill is long overdue. He installed a \$100,000, 8-foot fence around 265 acres of his property five years ago to try to stop the deer from damaging crops.

"With the amount of deer hunting we were doing, we weren't getting the job done," Butler said. "We were having terrific losses."

The bill also reduces the buffer zone for firing a gun near a public road from 100 to 50 yards. A council committee had originally recommended eliminating the buffer zone around a road completely, but the council decided to retain a buffer that

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prohibits the shooting of a gun from a road based on input from the county's Firearms Safety Committee and county police Chief J. Thomas Manger.

The police chief expressed concern a few weeks ago in a letter to the council, writing that drivers would have difficulty seeing the hunters discharging guns along the side of a road if the buffer was removed.

The council's Public Safety Committee agreed, according to the staff report. The bill also kept the stipulation that prohibits the discharge of a gun or bow on or across from a road.

Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, who introduced the bill two years ago, said the most important aspect of the bill was the stipulation that allows hunting in urban areas with large tracts of land.

Knapp said it would help landowners manage deer and reduce the crop damage for farmers in the county.

"I'm pleased we finally got it through," Knapp said. "Because of the extra time we took, we made sure we had the right safeguards in place."

County Council Vice President Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, chairman of the Public Safety Committee, said he is confident the bill will help reduce vehicle collisions and make the county safer.

"We gave it careful scrutiny," he said. "I'm satisfied with how the bill came out. I think it will help reduce the overpopulation of deer."