

COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS LOOKS TO THE FUTURE, BEGINS REZONING PROCESS

Move is meant to ensure the future of the Agricultural Fair, Executive Director says

By Nathan Carrick

The Montgomery County Agricultural Center has asked Gaithersburg to consider rezoning the 63-acre property in a move meant to ensure the Agricultural Fair continues on well into the future.

Martin Svrcek, the Executive Director of the Montgomery County Agricultural Center, said the application would change the privately-owned property from I-1 (industrial) and R-A (light residential) to MXD, or mixed-use development.

"It puts a classification on the land that could be used if we needed to sell the land to ensure the future of the Fair," he said. "The Fair is our prime mission."

He added that the property is not for sale.

Greg Ossont, Director of Planning and Code Enforcement at the City, said consolidating the two zones into one would give the Center more flexibility in the future.

A hearing on the rezoning would not happen for several months, he said.

The Agricultural Center is a privately-owned, 501(c)3 company and is not owned by managed by Montgomery County or any government agency, Svrcek said.

"We operate as a business," he said. "The Fair happens to be our biggest fundraiser every year."

The rezoning comes as part of a long-term strategic plan for the fairgrounds which began in 2006, Svrcek said.

"We're at the point right now where we've determined it's in our best interest to rezone," he said, adding that the new zone would be more appropriate for future and current uses of the property.

Rumors about the County looking for a place to build a sports arena have been circling for months, and the two locations repeatedly mentioned are Redgate Golf Course in Rockville and the Fairgrounds, Ossont said.

But Svrcek wants to be clear, the arena and the rezoning are not cause-and-effect.

"The arena concept is part of the consideration because it's a possibility," he said. "But at this point, it's only a possibility. No decisions regarding the future of the property have been made, and we're trying to make the best data-driven decision for the future of the fair."

Continuing the educational benefits of the Fair for visitors and support for Montgomery County's farmers is ultimately the top priority, he added.

There are about 50 buildings on the property, most of which were built by volunteers. Next summer will mark the Fair's 63rd year at its location in the heart of the City.