

Montgomery County fairgrounds hedges bets on development

By: [Liz Farmer](#) 12/06/10 8:05 PM

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The owner of the [Montgomery County Fairgrounds](#) is taking steps to make the property more attractive to developers, but a fair official says they are not ready to sell the land just yet.

Marty Svrcek, executive director of the Montgomery County Agricultural Center Inc., said Monday the nonprofit wants to change its zoning to mixed-use as part of a long-term plan.

"The fairgrounds is not for sale," he said. "We just want to make sure we have operations in place should we ever have to move."

The change in zoning, if approved, would mean that the 62-acre tract near the heart of Old Town Gaithersburg on Route 355 would be ripe for a development mirroring the many residential-retail-office complexes that run along the thoroughfare in the southern part of the county.

"Zoning has a big effect on the value of the property -- it can either make it or break it," said Robert H. Nelson, an urban planning expert and professor at the University of Maryland.

Nelson said that while each property is unique, going through the rezoning now -- and banking on a future developer's intentions -- could increase the land's value when it comes time to sell.

According to Montgomery County property records, the land and its buildings are valued at more than \$17 million.

According to the deed, the Agricultural Center bought the land for \$10 in 1949 from a local farmer who sold it on the condition that it be used for promoting farming and agriculture in the community.

Svrcek said that mission has become more challenging as the county's farms have been parceled out for development. In the 1960s, the county had roughly 150 dairy farms -- today it has four.

But the property itself likely will play the biggest role in the fair's future. Svrcek said most of the buildings on the fairgrounds are nearly 60 years old and maintenance is becoming cumbersome.

"If we couldn't continue to fix and repair the buildings and infrastructure, that would be what would drive the move," he said.

The nonprofit has been eyeing a tract on Old Baltimore Road in Olney, but Svrcek said it is lacking all the utilities and infrastructure fairgrounds would require.

