

Glenstone sewer request to be reviewed Thursday by Montgomery County Council panel

By Miranda S. Spivack, *The Washington Post*. Published: July 12, 2012

Potomac billionaire Mitchell Rales's request for a sewer line for a new building to house his Glenstone art collection comes before a Montgomery County Council committee Thursday in what will be the first test of Rales's campaign to win over local lawmakers.

It's not certain whether the committee, chaired by Council President Roger Berliner (D-Bethesda, Potomac), and including Council members Nancy Floreen (D-At large) and Hans Riemer (D-At large) will vote immediately on Rales's request and three other sewer extension proposals. But robust discussion is likely as lawmakers attempt to sort out complicated legal and political issues.

Should they hew to the letter of the county master plan for the area, which generally bans sewer in favor of septic as a means to control growth and traffic? Or should they give Glenstone a waiver that in the past has been used primarily for religious institutions and schools?

In his first interview in 27 years, published in Tuesday's *Washington Post*, Rales said he was learning the nuances of local politics and regulation, a habitat far different from the business boardroom or factory floors in companies controlled by his highly successful Danaher Corporation. Rales, who grew up in Bethesda, formed the company in 1984 with his brother Steven and built it into a multibillion-dollar conglomerate that includes makers of wrenches, dental equipment, drill parts and medical equipment. An unflattering profile in *Forbes* in 1985 led Rales to shun the media, but he decided to talk about his hopes to broaden public access to his art collection — and the sewer line — to explain what he called “the value proposition” that is Glenstone.

“I have never really had to engage politicians,” Rales told *The Post*. “In my business, we have just been able to do what we had to do and forge ahead. Here, it is a very different process. If we don't educate people and at least put our best foot forward, I would say we have not served our foundation properly.”

The Glenstone Foundation owns one of the most remarkable collections of modern art in private hands. Rusty Powell, director of the National Gallery of Art, called the 25,000-square-foot gallery that includes works by Calder, Matisse and Rothko “one of the world's most important” post-World War II-era collections.

Rales and his wife, Emily Wei Rales, a trained curator, want to make the collection more accessible to the public. They plan to build a new, 125,000-square-foot building that would rival the East Building of the National Gallery.

To try to win friends and influence local leaders, the Raleses have hosted hundreds of neighbors, politicians and business people at the gallery, which overlooks a manmade pond and several outdoor sculptures.

“We have worked hard to have people come out and understand who we are, what we are trying to accomplish and the value proposition associated with Glenstone,” Rales said.

But county rules generally don't allow sewer in the area off Glen Road where Glenstone is located. And local activists and environmentalists question whether the proposed sewer line, at 3,000 feet one of the largest the county ever would approve, is the right move. They say Rales could afford his own, on-site sewage treatment plant and worry that a connection to the public sewer would run across an environmentally vulnerable stream that the county years ago vowed to protect.

So it falls to the local elected officials, and eventually the state environment department, to sort out whether Glenstone gets a reprieve from local regulations.

The administration of County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has recommended that Glenstone get its sewer connection. The county planning board, led by Chairman Francoise Carrier, recommended against giving Glenstone the connection, saying it does not meet the terms of the county master plan and does not qualify for a waiver.