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St. Louis Residents Concerned Development Would Endanger Water, Graves

By Sep 12, 2019

Residents living in and around the village of St. Louis might not be happy with a developer's drive to build a few dozen homes there, but they're beginning to get the answers they're searching for.

About 50 residents crowded into the Mt. Zion Baptist Church of St. Louis's congregation hall Thursday afternoon to hear from County Chairwoman Phyllis J. Randall (D-At Large), Loudoun Environmental Health Manager George Khan, and Loudoun Historic Preservation Planner Heidi Siebentritt about developer Jack Andrews' plans to build by-right 30 houses on 19 acres of land along Snake Hill Road—land that borders the Baptist church's property to the north and east. Common among the residents' comments were concerns that those development plans would adversely affect the community's water supply and dozens of unmarked grave sites.

Randall asserted that new development might create water flow issues with some of the existing wells in the village and that a new development could increase residents' taxes, as more people move in and require county services.

She also pointed out that the location of Andrews' proposed development might be the site of numerous unmarked graves, many of which could belong to enslaved people from hundreds of years ago.

Khan told the residents that while Loudoun County regulations on well digging are tighter than those of other jurisdictions, St. Louis is unique in that it features 40 mapped wells, the depth and yield of which the county is unsure.

"With so many unknown wells in St. Louis, it's hard to tell what can be impacted by what," he said.

Resident Sharon Peterson, who owns a property with five springs on it, said the idea of digging more wells scares her because she can't afford to dig another well or pay higher taxes.

"I'm trying to just exist, and it's getting harder and harder," she said.

Aside from the possibility that drilling more wells in the village might deplete the water supply of surrounding landowners, resident Shannon Casey mentioned that the village's water supply has experienced other types of problems for years now, specifically that it's full of minerals that frequently turn water orange and yellow.

Casey said the hard water has broken down three filtration systems and that it's tinted her hair red, which is why she now does her laundry at her parents' house outside of the area. "It's not that I'm completely against development, I'm against his development," she said.

When a local farmer said that the county has known about the village's water issues for "many, many decades" and done nothing about it, Khan acknowledged that the county has "always been aware" of those issues but that it "hasn't wanted to spend the time and effort to mitigate the quality issues."

When asked about the village wells' water pressure and capacity, Khan told residents that the county has never checked the water table there.

As for any unmarked graves on the property where Andrews is going to build, Siebentritt said that an archeological survey done there, which was submitted to the county on Sept. 11, revealed 23 graves and estimated that there are 23-30 more. "It's a large cemetery," she said.

Siebentritt said that while applying to list the village on the National Register of Historic Places wouldn't stop the by-right development from moving forward, it would prompt Virginia's Historic Preservation Office to review the impacts the development might have on the area's historic resources.

On a more local level, the Board of Supervisors on Wednesday directed the Planning Commission to execute more work on proposed new county regulations that could increase buffers around burial grounds from 25 to 50 feet. "We have to make sure there's an appropriate buffer in the cemetery," Randall said.

After repeated controversies around development encroaching on historic burial grounds, a number of county committees have proposed new rules for protecting cemeteries for development. But some county supervisors and community activists worry those protections don't go far enough.



Loudoun County Historic Preservation Planner Heidi Siebentritt takes a closer look at grave sites located on adjacent property to the Mt. Zion Baptist Church of St. Louis. (Patrick Szabo/Loudoun Now)

Burial Ground Buffers Get More Work

In March of 2018, supervisors directed county staff members and committees to update a variety of standards for development around landscape buffers and screening. That also included around cemeteries, a hot topic in Loudoun as development has repeatedly brushed up against—or even bulldozed over—historic burial grounds.

Recommendations from county advisory commissions varied. According to a staff report, the Heritage Commission supported a 50-foot buffer around burial grounds, but could also support a 25-foot buffer plus another 25 foot "preservation area," where land disturbance is permitted only with permission from the county Zoning Administrator. The Zoning Ordinance Action Group, Facilities Standards Manual Public Review Committee and Planning Commission supported eliminating the preservation buffer and allowing development and building in that area, but with a maximum 3:1 slope for grading.

That was what came before supervisors at a public hearing on Sept. 11, and which supervisors unanimously sent to the Planning Commission for more work on a motion made by Randall.

They faced pressure from speakers at the public hearing to give cemeteries more protection.

"It may require more work, but the preservation of lives and stories is worth the work," said Leesburg Town Council member and Loudoun Freedom Center Executive Director Ron Campbell.

Thomas Balch Library Black History Committee member Ann Daye said it's a personal topic to her.

"My family was dug up, and we don't know what happened to the remains," Daye said. She said cemeteries are sacred places that need protection.

"Give them the 50 feet. I don't know why you all are upset about 25 feet," Daye said. "We need this protection. It's been too many cemeteries that have been bulldozed, things built on top of it, and it's not that nobody knew that they were cemeteries."

Loudoun Freedom Center founder and Loudoun NAACP President Michelle Thomas said she is "probably the foremost authority on this cemetery buffer issue" after being a leading voice on the African-American Burial Ground for the Enslaved at Belmont. At one time, the burial ground at the corner of the Rt. 7 and Belmont Ridge Road intersection was threatened by construction. The historically black burial ground includes many who labored as slaves at the nearby Belmont and Cotton plantations—today's Belmont Country Club and Lansdowne on the Potomac neighborhoods.

"It all comes down to this: how smart does Loudoun want to grow?" Thomas said. "I know we want to grow, and I want you to grow, but we have to put people and preservation over profits."

The rest of the new ordinances, including enhanced screening requirements around data centers, will go to the board's meeting Oct. 17 for a vote.



About 50 St. Louis-area residents crowded into the congregation hall of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church of St. Louis on Thursday to hear how a 30-home development might impact their water supply, taxes and numerous unmarked graves. (Patrick Szabo/Loudoun Now)

Does By-Right Mean Too Late?

In all, Randall told the residents that she is doing all she can to stop the development from happening, but that the county can't outright stop by-right development. With that in mind, she told the residents that they shouldn't hold the Board of Supervisors accountable if the project moves to construction.

"Let me be as clear as possible—I don't want this to happen," she said. "Were it up to me, I would never approve an application [for development] in St. Louis."

Randall said she might be able to use the information gathered at Thursday's meeting to "do everything in my power to try" to stop the development. "Information is ammunition and that is why I'm standing here today," she said.

Moving forward, Randall said she would schedule a meeting with Andrews, followed by another with county staff and yet another with both Andrews and county staff. She promised residents that once those meetings take place, she would hold another community meeting with them to bring them up to speed on where the project stands.

"You will know what I know as soon as I can set a meeting with you," she told them. "I will keep you all abreast of what's going on and that is my promise to you."

Andrews could not be reached for comment.

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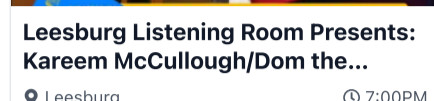
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