

Arundel Gateway project approved after council overrides veto

Council votes unanimously to reinstate zoning change

By Nicole Fuller, The Baltimore Sun

10:05 PM EDT, October 4, 2010

One of the largest proposed developments in Anne Arundel County won final approval Monday night after the County Council reversed a decision by County Executive John R. Leopold.

In a rare veto override, the council voted unanimously to reinstate an earlier amendment rezoning the 300-acre property known as Arundel Gateway to allow for a 1,600-home development. Supporters say the project is needed to support job growth spurred by the federal base realignment and closure plan, or BRAC.

The council's override is the first of Leopold's administration, which has issued four vetoes.

Leopold sharply criticized the council after the decision, calling it a "victory for special interests over citizens."

"The county council is letting one group of developers get at the front of the line," said Leopold, a Republican, in a statement. "What do I say to the dozens of developers who came to me during the last four years and wanted spot zoning. ... Everybody's got to play by the same rules."

C. Edward Middlebrooks, council chairman, said it was important to approve the project because it would provide necessary infrastructure for the 14,000 or so jobs expected in the Fort Meade area next year when military workers relocate to Maryland because of BRAC.

Leopold, who is running for re-election, has argued that rezoning for Arundel Gateway, which he has called "a worthy project," should have waited for approval during the county's comprehensive rezoning process, which happens once every decade. The rezoning is scheduled to be considered by the council this fall.

The county's Office of Planning and Zoning has received more than 400 applications for rezoning, including the Arundel Gateway project. While the council has occasionally adjusted zoning to accommodate a project, it has generally waited for the comprehensive rezoning bill to change the category, which was done with Arundel Gateway by shifting it from industrial to mixed use.

Supporters of a nearby proposed development decried the county's rezoning process this year after the developer of a 1,000-home project called RiverWood offered to build a \$23 million elementary school to entice county leaders to approve the project. RiverWood is awaiting county approval.

Leopold's critics have contended that the county executive has delayed acting on the larger rezoning bill until after the November election to avoid potential political fallout, which Leopold denies. Leopold said it took time for planning and zoning officials to sort through the applications and make recommendations, and the council first had to pass storm-water runoff rules in accordance with a new state law.

Mike Shay, the Green Party candidate for county executive, who spoke out during the meeting, said he was "appalled" by the council's actions.

"It's another example of short-sighted support for development instead of planning for the future," Shay said. "The county should be working with communities like Russet and Maryland City to promote responsible growth instead of forcing inappropriate development on an already overstressed area."

Joanna Conti, a Democrat running for county executive, has said that Leopold is "playing political games" by delaying a vote on comprehensive zoning.

For the Arundel Gateway project, Annapolis-based Ribera Development and Greenberg Gibbons Commercial of Owings Mills plan to build 1,600 residential units with 360,000 square feet of office space, 160,000 square feet of retail space and a 150-room hotel near Route 198 in Laurel, east of the Baltimore-Washington Parkway.

The developers could not be reached for comment.

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