

# The Capital Arundel Report

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## KI public housing proposal met with outcry

### Protests spur commissioners to ask for alternatives

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Public outcry has forced Queen Anne's officials to rethink building a cluster of 108 low-income apartments off Cox Neck Road in Chester.

The plan crept onto the public's radar last month when residents who live nearby found out about a public meeting to be held just before Thanksgiving.

In 24 hours, concerned residents were able to muster about 100 people for the meeting called by county housing officials.

Then on Nov. 27, residents packed the County Commissioners meeting to protest the plan to build the units next to 24 existing low-income townhouses off Riverside Drive, about 1.5 miles south of Route 50 on Cox Neck Road.

Project opponents pointed to in-

creased crime, traffic, and reduced property values as some of the problems the new units would generate.

The protest led commissioners to ask staff and housing officials to come up with alternatives to the current plan.

The plan dates back to the 1980s, but was finally brought forward in March when funding for preliminary planning on the project was approved.

"I went to about 100 of my neighbors and they could not believe they were even thinking about doing something like this," said Ed Chester who lives in Benton's Pleasure, a community across Cox Neck Road from the proposed site.

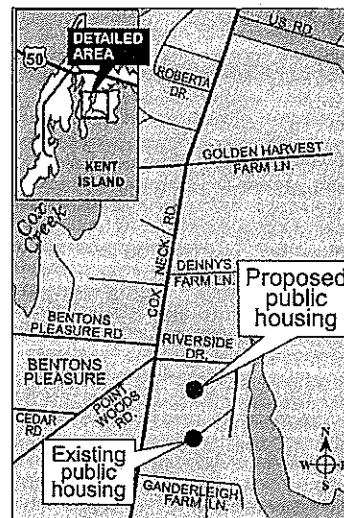
He and others think concentrating that many poor people in a small area will only invite the drug trade and other crime.

"Why repeat the mistakes of other cities," the Baltimore City fireman said. "I have seen it first hand."

Michael Koval, a former county commissioner and resident of Benton's Pleasure said he is against it, too.

"I work in Annapolis and I see how public housing works. You see a white guy pull in there in a Mercedes and leave five minutes later, you see a lot of that," he said.

Local residents stood before commissioners with tales of used condoms and needles being found on the playground of the current housing facility, Riverside Estates. Another resident who lives on an adjoining farm told of a man accosting her near her barn, then running off in the direction of the housing project. She also reported finding party encampments along the



Capital graphic

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waterfront.

Though not direct, many of the comments seemed stereotypical, painting public housing residents with a street gang, drug-selling brush. That prompted Commissioner Courtney Billups to say that some of the comments, especially some received by e-mail, were not respectful.

"Some have been ugly. It is one thing to say the volume of homes affects my interests ... But let's be careful about things we say that are not thoughtful, not factual ... and cast aspersions on people we have never met," he said. "Try to be respectful citizens to one another."

The county Sheriff's Office brought statistics that seemed to contradict the public housing-gangland stories.

Sgt. Sonny Jones reported to the commissioners there were only 11 calls for service between Jan. 1 and Nov. 26 at the current housing project.

But the sheriff's office is convinced "crime will increase exponentially because of the number of people," Sgt. Jones said.

Complainants urged county officials to look at alternatives, perhaps splitting up the planned 108 units into smaller projects across the county.

"It's a big county. I feel like we are already doing our part," said Benton Pleasure resident Tom Fox. Adding more public housing in the same spot would be "like pouring gas on a fire."

They also urged the county to help create affordable housing for the county's teachers, police and fire department employees.

Some were told those were among the target tenants for the project. But both teachers and police officers starting pay is above the \$31,860 income level limit for a single person in the housing project.

Housing Authority chief Peter Scanlon noted that the need lies in lower income levels. There are some 350 people on a waiting list for low-income housing.

"We are tasked with the goal of providing affordable housing

for that segment of the population that are not served by the private sector," he said. "There is no point in the housing authority building housing for those who can be served by the private sector."

But he admitted that line is beginning to blur.

"Fewer and fewer people can reasonably afford to buy or even rent housing as the median house price goes into the \$300s or even \$400s."

On Dec. 18, county commissioners want to see compromise proposals for Riverside Estates, Phase II or alternative uses for the property.

"We are asked the commissioners to come back with as many option options as possible, all the residential ideas we can think of," said Gregg Todd, the county's chief operating officer. "We understand the community's concerns and are weighing all the options to provide some housing there."

He would not talk about possible alternatives before the Dec. 18 meeting.

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