

Our Say: On west county project, council acted responsibly

The County Council's unanimous decision to override a veto by County Executive John R. Leopold wasn't the ideal way to deal with the growth of west county.

It was, however, the only way available. Or, to be more exact, it was the only way that Leopold had left open for the council.

The alternative was to put off action on the Arundel Gateway project for months - and perhaps for another year, while a largely new County Council gets acclimated and comes to grips with comprehensive zoning.

Given that jobs are already starting to flow into the area of Fort George G. Meade thanks to the Base Realignment and Closure process, such a decision would have been irresponsible. The 1,600 homes in the 250-acre mixed-use project are needed in that area now. So is the \$20 million the developer plans to spend on nearby roads.

The council did the right thing. And it obviously wasn't something done lightly, as council members knew this override would open them to accusations of giving a developer "special treatment," to use Leopold's term.

Leopold, in contrast, gets to have his cake and denounce it too. Thanks to the council's override, the Arundel Gateway project - which Leopold agrees is a good one - will go forward. Meanwhile, his veto puts him on record for keeping the county's comprehensive zoning process pristine, and scores points with environmental and controlled-growth groups.

The county executive is right when he says that such growth issues should be dealt with as part of comprehensive zoning. But why was the comprehensive zoning process, in the works for so long, pushed back until after the election? Why, at the very least, was there was no fast-tracking of the projects in the area due to be affected by BRAC?

Leopold said that the planning and zoning process took time and he had to wait for the council to pass storm-water runoff rules. The council didn't buy this, and we don't either. Leopold can move things very quickly when he wants to. On this issue, he didn't want to.

He senses - and he's probably right - that there's a political price to be paid for signing off on any more growth, even in an area expected to get as many as 14,000 more jobs.

Still, Arundel Gateway is in the county's new General Development Plan. It had been approved for water and sewer, and for capital bond money. And it's tied by adequate facilities requirements to another project, Riverwood, which will bring badly needed work-force housing and a K-8 "contract school."

In short, Arundel Gateway is not only needed but was very far down the pipeline. Holding it up made no sense. Leopold should have explained that to the voters and found a better way to expedite the project. Instead, he stood on technicalities, letting the County Council do the heavy lifting - and take the risk.

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