

## The Granite Cliffs Development (Again)

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A proposal for an 830-home development that borders the town of Port Deposit has again surfaced within the past few months. I say “again” because the development, in a somewhat smaller configuration, was considered two years ago and disapproved by the Planning Commission. Now it is back in a larger form and has already gotten farther than before.

The land is owned by the Arundel Corporation and currently about half of it is in agricultural production. The remainder is fairly steep and is mostly wooded. The property, which is on the north side of MD 276 just east of Port Deposit, is zoned Suburban Residential. It sits atop the 300-foot rise on the northeast side of the Susquehanna River, overlooking Port Deposit. The developer proposes a Planned Unit Development (PUD), which doubles the allowed zoning density. A PUD requires a Special Exception from the Board of Appeals. The hearing for that is set for the evening of April 26.

Four things have changed in two years:

- (1) The development is now 110 homes larger.
- (2) The development is now depending on county water and sewer, which is not yet available but is planned.
- (3) New stormwater management regulations are now in effect that have significantly changed how runoff is handled. Large stormwater collection ponds are no longer used; a development is supposed to absorb its own rain water.
- (4) The Bainbridge project, literally right across the road, seems to be in deep distress (even more so than two years ago) and construction is not likely any time in the foreseeable future.

CLUA members and Port Deposit area residents have been following this proposal as it starts its way through the county approval process. At the Planning Commission meeting on March 21, we expressed many concerns about the plan. In the end, however, the Planning Commission recommended, by a 3-1 vote, that the Board of Appeals approve the Special Exception for the PUD. Here are some of our issues:

1. First, the size of this proposed development is massive, and the full implications of that have not been considered. This development will, at build-out, be at least twice as large in projected population as the town of Port Deposit, which it adjoins, and taken alone, it would be either the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> largest town in Cecil County. It will pour hundreds of cars per day onto local county roads (by the developer’s own traffic study) and hundreds of students into the local county schools (see point 4 below). It has the potential to change the character, demographics, and politics of the town of Port Deposit. Yet the developer has apparently made no effort to engage the local community in his plans and there

have been no public meetings at which the full ramifications of this development have been discussed, or the concerns of citizens or public officials addressed.

2. The development will go on land that is now partly wooded and partly agricultural, and drains into Rock Run, which runs through Port Deposit. It will place a large area of impervious surfaces into that steep watershed several hundred feet above the town. On July 12, 2004, a severe thunderstorm turned Rock Run into a raging torrent that caused severe flooding and property damage in Port Deposit. (A 4-minute DVD of this event, quite alarming to view, is now in the development file in the county's Office of Planning and Zoning.) Placing a huge housing development on land that drains into the run could make a similar weather event even more catastrophic. The county – with little practical experience with the new stormwater management regulations – is basically trusting that the developer's stormwater management plan will work. If it doesn't, the consequences for people down the hill could be severe.

3. The effect on the Bainbridge property, which is literally just across the road, has also not been considered. Many hours of planning by many people in this county over many years have gone into Bainbridge. It may well be the case that two developments side-by-side at that location are not both economically viable. That is, approving Granite Cliffs might finally be the death knell for Bainbridge. If so, all the work by the Bainbridge Development Corporation toward a carefully planned, multi-use community would be down the drain. At the very least, the two developments need to be considered together, in the context of growth in and around Port Deposit. The last time Granite Cliffs was considered, the Bainbridge Development Corp. stated that it was not concerned with what went on "beyond our fence". If they aren't, somebody else should be.

4. The developer estimates that this development will bring in just over \$2 million in county property taxes each year. That may seem like a lot of money until the costs to the county are subtracted. The county school system spends \$4200 of county money on each student each year, in its existing facilities. If this development of 830 three- and four-bedroom homes sends more than 500 students to county schools, the projected property tax revenue will be all used up just for education. And, that number of kids will send the three local schools over capacity, even assuming no other sources of enrollment growth. The full costs to the county of this development have not been assessed. An application for a PUD is supposed to contain an estimate of the "cost-benefit ratio" to the county, but all that was submitted was the property tax estimate. Yet the Planning Commission ignored this requirement (because, they said, it has never been explicitly stated what the county expects) and voted to approve the plan.

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Granite Cliffs is a prime example of piecemeal consideration of growth; that is, we consider one development at a time as though they were all in isolation. There is little regard to the effects of each development on the surrounding

community, the broader natural environment, other plans for the area, or county taxpayers. This plan should not be taken in isolation — at the very least, both the Bainbridge Development Corporation and the town of Port Deposit need to be brought into the process as active players. This development is of such a size that it should not go forward without a process in place to properly assess all aspects of what is being proposed. The developer has shown little interest so far in such a process.

The Board of Appeals will consider the special exception request from the developer on **Tuesday, April 26 at 7 pm in the County Administration Building**. Public comment at the meeting, or letters to the Board prior to the meeting, are needed.