

County weighs dueling visions for Maple Lawn South

Iager family sees room to grow; neighbors envision crowded roads and schools

Residents Christine Pereira and Paul Spelman are opposed to land owner Gene Iager's plans to use an almost 100 acre parcel of his land for development. They are standing in Pereira's backyard, with the parcel of land under consideration just past her lawn. (Gene Sweeney Jr. / Baltimore Sun / May 22, 2013)

By [Arthur Hirsch](#), The Baltimore Sun

5:57 p.m. EDT, May 23, 2013

Gene Iager and Chris Pereira live on opposite sides of Scaggsville Road in Fulton, and take conflicting views of a 91-acre expanse of grass and woods that lies between them.

Iager looks out his front window and across the road at the land and sees a future development of apartments, townhouses and single-family homes that would let his farming family cash in on years of hard work, while also suiting the goals of local and state planners.

Pereira looks at the green field out her back door and sees a potential suburban mess — what she believes will be too many people on too little land, generating more traffic than roads can handle, packing schools and spilling runoff into a stream that runs through the property not far from Triadelphia Reservoir.

Their argument about the proposal, known as Maple Lawn South, has unfolded in recent months, as Howard County planners work to update zoning designations to follow goals of PlanHoward 2030, a county master plan adopted last summer. Department of Planning staff and the Planning Board have made their recommendations; final votes are expected to be taken this summer by the County Council.

Pereira's group, Voters for Common-Sense Growth, has hired an attorney, collected nearly 1,200 petition signatures, written emails to county officials, met with planners and developers and is planning a rally on Saturday near the Maple Lawn South site to oppose Iager's zoning change request.

Each side in the dispute accuses the other of presenting a distorted view of the proposal.

Iager and his attorney, William E. Erskine, said opponents exaggerate the potential harm; Pereira's group says the would-be developers are vastly understating it.

Under current zoning, Iager could build about 40 single-family houses. He's asking for a change that would allow 15 housing units an acre — about 1,365 units overall if all 91 acres are buildable.

But Iager says he does not want that many units, though the exact number has not been determined.

Pereira said the ambiguity gives her no comfort.

"It doesn't make sense," said Pereira. "It's very, very dense. Much too dense for this town, for the population, for everything."

Combined with addition development at the original Maple Lawn, which is across Route 216 (Scaggsville Road), she said residents fear Iager's project could cause school overcrowding, meaning it could be necessary to redraw school boundaries.

Voters for Common-Sense Growth has offered an alternative that would allow up to two housing units per acre, bar rental apartments and require half the property be set aside as open space.

"What a waste of land," Iager said.

He recalled similar protests over the Maple Lawn project years ago. Built on more than 600 acres of Iager family land on the north side of Scaggsville Road, the development is now roughly half-completed, with 780 units in town-houses, condominiums and single-family homes, and nearly 800,000 square feet of office and commercial space.

It's all part of what was once a 1,200-acre expanse, a farming tradition started by Iager's great-great-grandfather in the 1830s.

Time to grow?

Asked why the family now also wants to sell the 91 acres on the south side of the road, Iager said the time is right.

He said he can't see how he and his older brother, Charles, and their families can continue farming as they have been, although they do intend to keep a 108-acre dairy and turkey farm on the north side of Scaggsville.

"We've always been land-rich and money-poor," said Gene Iager, 66. "So what do you do? So when is the right time?"

Now, it seems — given the growth of the area: "Location, location, location," he said.

Indeed, the property is well positioned, minutes from Interstate 95 and U.S. 29 and about a mile from the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory — the county's largest private employer — and across from the public schools, stores, restaurants and offices at Maple Lawn.

Erskine said the proposal fits the goals of PlanHoward and represents what the anti-suburban-sprawl Smart Growth idea was about when it was first proposed by Gov. Parris N. Glendening in the early 1990s. He said the opponents' alternative would only perpetuate sprawl.

The opponents, Erskine said, "seem to think Smart Growth is compact, walkable communities developed in somebody else's neighborhood."

For their part, the opponents say Maple Lawn South isn't consistent with Smart Growth or PlanHoward, which calls for extending public water and sewer service to this property and two others in [Ellicott City](#) and Clarksville.

County Councilman Greg Fox, who represents Fulton, says he's opposed to the proposed development, which he said is "not even in the ballpark" of PlanHoward's guidelines for that area. He said PlanHoward's proposal for the property to be connected to public water and sewer service isn't designed to promote more intense development; it's intended to curb the use of septic systems for "bay restoration."

"The administration never discussed the desire for that type of change," said Fox. "That's not appropriate ... it's pretty clear."

Mixed opinions

County planners don't entirely agree. Planning director Marsha S. McLaughlin, who met with Pereira and other opponents last week to discuss their alternative, recently wrote in an email to some residents, "We need to grow smarter. Higher density, mixed use development that is walkable and in close proximity to transit is essential ... to accommodate growth, minimize sprawl, and protect the environment."

Her agency, the county Planning Department, recommends the zoning Iager wants. Lower density on the Iager property, McLaughlin said, "was not an appropriate use" of land so close to highways and employment.

Meanwhile, members of the Planning Board recommend a mix of that zoning, and the much less dense use that Pereira's group advocates, but has not specified how much land should be allocated to each.

Opponents say they are not reassured by the county's Adequate Public Facilities laws, which tie the number of homes that can be built in a given year to school and road capacity. Neither are they mollified by Erskine's suggestion that the first residents of Maple Lawn South would probably not move in until at least six years from now, when the picture of school enrollments could be very different.

Current projections are that nearby Fulton Elementary and Lime Kiln Middle School will be 84 and 83 percent full, respectively, when school opens at the end of this summer, said Joel Gallihue, manager of school planning. Reservoir High will be at 94 percent of capacity by August, he said.

Adequate Public Facilities limits on growth do not kick in until a school reaches 115 percent of capacity, McLaughlin said, and do not apply to high schools.

Regarding environmental concerns about development, Erskine said potentially polluting runoff from roofs and paved roads and driveways would have to be controlled under state stormwater laws — which he contended would actually improve on the current conditions. The field is now used to graze cows, whose waste is washed directly into streams, he said.

Fred Tutman, the CEO of the Patuxent Riverkeeper organization, said that argument makes no sense.

"It's a ridiculous argument," Tutman said. "No building is better for the environment. Nature's plan is always better than the built universe."

For some Fulton residents, Maple Lawn South represents what they tried to escape by moving to what was a rural area not so long ago.

Elizabeth Cooper recently wrote to county officials that she moved to the area about 12 years ago from Montgomery County, where her family had lived more than 20 years. She said she left to be closer to work and to "escape the growing crowding and congestion."

She said with Maple Lawn, and now Maple Lawn South, it seems to have followed her.

"In the relatively short time we have lived here," she wrote, "we have seen development that makes the crowding we left in Montgomery County pale in comparison."

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