

North Hill Project Lingers

Despite compromise and years of waiting, little action at site.

By MICHAEL LEE POPE
THE GAZETTE

A quarter-century has passed since the plot of land known as North Hill was purchased by Fairfax County for the development of low income housing. Since that time, recessions have come and gone. A giant housing bubble swelled to capacity and burst. Arguments have emerged to preserve the entire site as green-space. Counter-arguments have been made to use the entire 33-acre site for affordable housing.

Yet little has transpired at the site.

"This has all taken way too

long," said Keary Kincannon, pastor at Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church who has spent years pushing for affordable housing at the site. "I think the reason is that we are talking about something to help poor people, and poor people always get the crumbs."

Meanwhile, advocates for preserving trees at North Hill say the extended period of inaction has created a new set of problems. Environmental advocate Tim Berkoff says invasive English Ivy is choking several of the 100-year trees at the site. Although he tried to gain access to the site with a

SEE NORTH HILL, PAGE 5

NEWS

"Nobody is happy with this proposal."

— Supervisor Gerry Hyland

North Hill's Divided Future?

FROM PAGE 1

group of volunteers who were willing to contain some of the invasive growth, he says his request was denied by the county's housing authority. County officials did not return phone calls asking for a confirmation of his request.

"Everybody talks about how important tree-save is, yet nothing is happening to address this issue," said Berkoff. "These trees are being allowed to decline while everybody is arguing over the property."

THE SAGA of North Hill begins nearly 25 years ago, when the county purchased the property with funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for the development of low-income housing. As the project lingered, some began pushing for abandoning the original plans in favor of preserving green-space on Richmond Highway. As late as February, some were still lobbying for preserving 33 acres as a natural preserve.

"Environmentally we are losing tree cover, worsening stormwater management, and facing global warming," wrote Spring Bank Community Association President David Dale in an e-mail to his neighbors earlier this year. "In spite of all these factors, the county housing authority is continuing efforts to clear 11 acres of woodland to build a mobile home park."

After years of fighting between affordable-housing advocates and conservationists, Mount Vernon Supervisor Gerry Hyland adopted a compromise two years ago. Since that time, he's maintained a position that he would like to see 11 acres set aside for affordable housing with the rest preserved for green-space. Hyland said that his position is likely to please nobody, although he feels it's the most responsible approach to the land-use dilemma.

"There has never been any other subject that has divided people more than North Hill," said Hyland. "I feel like we've split the baby down the middle, and of course that doesn't make anybody happy."

ALTHOUGH LITTLE outward progress is noticeable at the site, the wheels of government are slowly moving behind the scenes. The Fairfax County Park Authority is engaged in a process to gather citizen input on what people would like to see in a potential future park. And the Fairfax County Housing Authority is moving forward with plans to develop a



An example of the manufactured housing proposed for North Hill.

master development proposal for constructing 11 acres of affordable housing.

Meanwhile, other more controversial changes are taking place behind the scenes. This spring a coalition of religious organizations known as Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement (VOICE) began pushing for the site to include rental housing for those who make 30 percent or less of the area median income. In May, Hyland agreed to setting aside 30 percent of the site for low-income rental, a move that angered community members who believe that the delicate compromise was based on all the properties being for sale rather than low-income rental — sometimes known as "section eight."

"Shame on him," said Katherine Ward, co-chairwoman of the Mount Vernon Council of Citizens Associations. "There was never any discussion I can recall of any of these properties being anything other than homeownership."

Ultimately, though, the development of affordable housing at North Hill could face a more pressing problem — funding. With the county facing declining revenue, affordable housing advocates are concerned that the project could have a hard time receiving any funding beyond planning and study. For those who have fought for low-income housing, the timing is particularly troubling because they say the affordable housing is needed now more than ever.

"The shelters are full, and there are people sleeping on the streets," said Kincannon, a leading member of VOICE in Mount Vernon. "There is a huge need for this right now."