

250,000 Gallons of Conflict in Mason Neck

GMU's plans for conflict resolution center could include 250,000 gallon sewage tank.

BY AMBER HEALY
THE CONNECTION

George Mason University's planned conflict resolution center on Ma-son Neck is causing quite a stir among its future neighbors, as early plans for the site include a possible 250,000 gallon sewage treatment plant.

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— Sara Cobb,
Director, ICAR

Sept. 11.

Mason Neck, with its small homes dotting the shores of the Potomac River, has been protected because of its sensitive environment and connection to the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Development has been all but avoided because residents have fought to prevent sewer service from being installed.

"No one could build anything larger than a house because you had to prove you could flush a toilet" that feeds into a septic tank, Albo said. "A lot of the land is clay and it doesn't perk, and you can't put a septic field on land that doesn't perk."

George Mason University acquired 120 acres of land in 2000 from the Lynch family, which currently has a house on the property and owns land adjacent to the site, according to an information sheet sent to Mason Neck residents. The family donated the land to the university in the hopes of creating a conflict resolution center, bringing people closer to nature and in an open environment to solve their problems.

"Point of View," as the facility would be called, would "include environmentally conscious buildings located on the western slip of the parcel where the Lynch's home stands" that would be separated from the neighborhood. The northern portion of the land would feature two residential buildings for staff and six graduate students and

a parking area. In the middle of the land would be administrative, lecture and arrival facilities, two buildings to serve as common space and meeting rooms, a library, offices and dining facilities. The center would also offer overnight accommodations for 35 guests, according to the handout.

THE SOUTHERN PART of the land would feature six, one-room buildings for meetings; the Lynch house, which will be renovated; and an outdoor amphitheater. It is estimated, according to the hand out, that overnight stays of 10 to 45 people could be facilitated at the site, with no more than 50 people there during the day, bringing the total to 100 visitors at Point of View on any given day.

"When this was first presented years ago, everyone was happy with it because it looked like a small campus," Albo said. The problems arose when people started taking a closer look at future stages of the development, which includes the 250,000 gallon tank.

"Even the DEQ says that's massive," Albo said. "Something must be going on. No one needs to build that big a tank for a confer-

ence center. If they want to build this tank, it will undoubtedly cause problems."

"They were given 120 acres and they've chosen to develop the 23 most sensitive," said George Arnold, a resident and activist leading the fight against the tank.

The center would be located on Kaness Creek, described by Arnold as an estuary that is integral to the Chesapeake Bay watershed which "needs more protection."

Despite plans from GMU to build environmentally-sensitive structures on the site, Arnold thinks any building, especially a huge tank, would damage the ecosystem there.

"George Mason has an environmental education program, they teach people how

to protect the environment and that big business needs to be more sensitive," he said. "But they took the first chance they had to build their facility with a waterfront view."

AFTER AN initial presentation to the Mason Neck Civic Association, Arnold said he's had trouble getting anyone at GMU to pro-

"Ew."

— Fairfax County
Board of Supervisors
Chairman Gerry
Connolly (D-At large)

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GMU's Proposed ICAR Center Raises Concerns

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vide insight on any changes or updates made to the plans. He hopes to bring an update to the civic association soon and has invited someone from GMU to present new information.

"This plan is wrong for Mason Neck," Arnold said. "If they want to show off their campus or their facilities, they've got a beautiful campus in Fairfax. This is not compatible with our community."

Sara Cobb, director for the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) at GMU, said plans for the tank came with the land when it was given to the university.

"Bill Lynch got the permit himself and what he planned to do with it, I have no idea," Cobb said. "It's not something we sought. We renew the permit every year and this is part of that permit."

Cobb said she doesn't believe GMU has any intention of building a tank that big, but nothing is in place to change the permit as it stands until further engineering and design studies have been completed.

"We don't want to eliminate any options

at this time," she said. "I can't imagine we'd build it, but we're in the master planning process right now."

Any and all buildings GMU does put on the site will take the environmentally-sensitive state of Mason Neck into consideration, Cobb said.

"We haven't done the architectural drawings or engineering studies yet, but we have no intentions of building anything that would require a facility that big," she said.

Bruce Scott, president of the Mason Neck Citizens Association, said most of the community's unrest would be eliminated if GMU put in writing their intentions not to build the plant at that size.

"They've told us they want to build an environmentally sterling, Frank Lloyd Wright-style campus with minimal impact on the environment," Scott said. "If that's

the case, we'd fully support it. The number one issue and our biggest concern is a tank of that size. We do not want that tank."

Supervisor Gerry Hyland (D-Mount Vernon) believes this kind of development on Mason Neck goes against the years of time and energy spent trying to preserve its environment.

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— George Arnold

and angry as I am and we will pull back the layers of this onion and lay it all out on the table before anything is built."

One possible snag in Hyland's efforts might be who technically owns the land. If the land is under ownership of George Mason University, plans for development would

not have to go through the county's Planning Commission because GMU is a state-owned and operated facility.

According to Tom Calhoun, vice president of facilities at GMU, the University Foundation is in the process of having land ownership transferred from GMU to the Commonwealth. Once the transfer is completed, the oversight for the project will be with the Commonwealth Bureau of Capital Outlay Management, Calhoun said in an e-mail.

"A key part of this state process, however, is the Environmental Impact Review led by the Department of Environmental Quality. An integral part of the EIR process, DEQ solicits input from affected localities and it is during this period that the County provides formal review and comment to the plan," he wrote.

Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerry Connolly (D-At-large) was not aware of the specifics of plans for the ICAR Center. When asked about the 250,000 gallon sewage tank, he had only one word.

"Ew," he said. "Are you serious? We'll have to look at that."