

Spotsylvania

Historic Battlefield at Heart of Conflict Over Growth

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To Civil War history buff Kevin P. Leahy, the fight against a proposed development on the site of the Battle of Chancellorsville is first and foremost about saving holy ground. He has photographs of himself as a boy visiting battlefields and calls their preservation "a lifelong passion."

Yet out in the parking lot of the Giant Food supermarket in Spotsylvania County, when the 32-year-old Web designer asks people to sign petitions against the massive housing and retail project, he talks traffic (too much of it), water (not enough) and schools (too few classrooms).

His table is plastered with signs that say "Stop Sprawl in Spotsylvania"—because he and the other preservationists campaigning against the Town of Chancellorsville development concede that protecting the battlefield alone isn't enough to rally residents in opposition.

The project would bring 2,000 homes and 1.2 million square feet of commercial space to the county. Now, after a year of acrimonious debate, a major decision could come within days. Hundreds of people are expected at a Board of Supervisors hearing Tuesday night on whether the 790-acre property known as the Mullins Farm should be rezoned to accommodate the project.

The board could vote after the hearing, but some members say they are likely to wait until their next session April 8.

Opponents' pragmatic, here-and-now strategy reflects the enormous demographic changes in a region that for more than 200 years has drawn its identity primarily from its role in early American history.

Almost half of Spotsylvania County's 100,000 residents have arrived in the last decade, and the same is true of neighboring Stafford County. Many people who moved from parts north for a better quality of life spend a lot of time commuting to work and don't have strong feelings about the region's history. That history includes four key Civil War battles—Fredericksburg,



PHOTOS BY JAY PAUL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Mary Jane King, left, listens as volunteers Nancy McNamara, Kevin Leahy and Stephany Seay talk about their opposition to development on the Mullins Farm as they prepare to hand out leaflets at a Fredericksburg grocery store.

Chancellorsville, the Wilderness and Spotsylvania—that left as many as 100,000 people dead or wounded.

"Not everyone is interested in the Civil War and fighting. On the other hand, you have to educate continuing generations about what their heritage has been so they will understand," said Caroline Hayden, a founding member of the Spotsylvania Preservation Foundation and an opponent of the development.

The Chancellorsville debate has turned bitter and personal, with both sides accusing the other of comprising outsiders and newcomers—or "come-heres," as they're sometimes called—trying to dictate what should become of this burgeoning county, how it should showcase and value its historic sites and what kind of growth it really needs.

A recent flyer distributed by the Spotsylvania Landowners Association, a property rights advocacy group that favors the project, teased that many of the opponents are like Union soldiers coming down from the north.

In response, the opposition coalition, led and funded in large part by the Civil War Preservation Trust, a national group based in Washington, issued a flyer pointing out that the developer, Dogwood Development Group, is based in Reston. "Exactly who is the outsider?" it asked.

The farm, gently rolling hills adjacent to the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, has been zoned since 1999 to allow 225 homes and about 5.5 acres of commercial space. John Mullins said he'll find somebody else to build on it under the current

zoning if Dogwood loses its rezoning bid and decides not to buy the property.

To some, the fight is about the right to develop one's property and the undeniable fact of growth that has galloped 60 miles south from the Washington suburbs to this region that never wanted to be considered part of Northern Virginia. Here, those two words mean traffic and high taxes.

"If you stop building down here, people won't have jobs, and a stagnant county is much worse than a thriving county," said Daniel Pemberton, a Spotsylvania native who is president of the 120-member Landowners Association. "Preservationists come down here and then they don't want anyone else to. This isn't the American way."

Noting that the county is now 80 percent residential, Pemberton



Opponents of development note traffic problems, for example, in Fredericksburg, as they fight the planned Town of Chancellorsville.

said the association stands for "as much commercial development as possible," to broaden the tax base and help pay for the schools, roads and police protection residents require.

Henry "Hap" Connors Jr., one of two new county supervisors who ran on their opposition to the Town of Chancellorsville, agreed that the balance is off. County Administrator Anthony Barrett recently proposed raising the county's real estate tax, now \$1.01 per \$100 of assessed value, by 5 cents. Connors, of the Chancellor District, said the board hopes to avoid a tax increase but says public services have to be provided.

"This is what growth brings you," he said, "and it's coming home to roost."

Dogwood President Ray Smith said he is complying with the comprehensive plan approved by the supervisors in February 2002 that puts the Mullins Farm in the designated "primary settlement district"—the area where the county wants to concentrate development. Since then, Connors and Supervisor Robert F. Hagan (Courtland District) have joined the board on slow-growth platforms. All seven supervisors are up for reelection this fall.

Among the electorate are those who say the county should be more protective of its historic resources. "People who come here to visit are coming because of the history, not

to visit Wal-Mart," Leahy said.

Jim Campi, spokesman for the Preservation Trust, said preservationists are being miscast in the Chancellorsville fight as radicals who want to save unused land at all costs and stop time in its tracks. He said productive preservation is just a different kind of economic development.

"If we can't make these battlefields into economic engines for the community, then we haven't made the case that people should be taking preservation seriously," he said. "Just having a field there isn't good enough. The sites need to be interpreted. They need to be an asset."

Campi's group, using a 1993 National Park Service study by a commission of experts authorized by Congress, said 270 to 300 acres of the Mullins Farm was the key battlefield at Chancellorsville. But Smith said he read four books on the battle and determined that the key portion of still-unprotected land is closer to 34 acres, which he has offered to preserve.

Robert K. Krick, who retired as chief historian for the park and is considered an authority on all four battles, said the idea that the key battlefield is only 34 acres is "revised" history.

"Spotsylvania County isn't interested in historic preservation," Krick said. "Everything is about to be paved over so people can sell inexpensive chicken."