

Chancellorsville Coalition Gets A Boost

By Deborah Fitts

SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY, Va. — Members of a preservation coalition hoping to stop a plan for a town-sized development adjacent to the Chancellorsville battlefield got a boost Aug. 29 when more than 300 residents and preservationists turned out against the project.

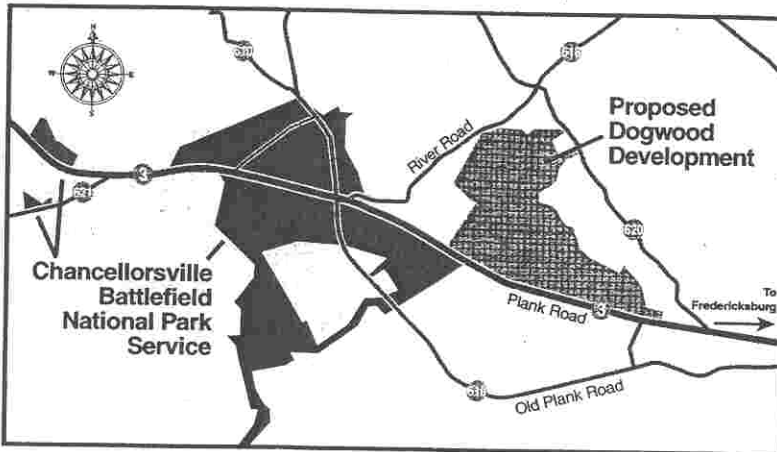
Also Aug. 29, a poll commissioned by the coalition indicated that two-thirds of Spotsylvania residents oppose the plan, which calls for 2350 homes and 2 to 3 million square feet of office and retail space. The development is slated for 788 acres of rolling farmland fronting Route 3 just east of the Chancellorsville unit of Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park.

"This was an extremely fine week," exulted Jim Campi, spokesman for the Civil War Preservation Trust, which is spearheading the seven-member coalition.

Dogwood Development Group of Reston, Va., is seeking a zoning change from the Spotsylvania County supervisors to allow for the project. Dogwood President Ray Smith Jr. said it will provide homes and jobs for 10,000 people and pour \$11 million in profits into county coffers annually.

Seeking to forestall what appeared to be sure-fire support from the supervisors, the coalition organized a public informational meeting at Chancellor High School on the 29th. Reporters noted that the crowd was larger than any drawn to a zoning controversy in recent memory.

Smith and county officials discussed the project, after which county supervisor Jerry Marcus, whose Courtland District includes the project area, fielded an onslaught of questions from the audience. With Spotsylvania one of the fastest-growing counties in the country, residents wanted to know more about traffic, water use, the



impact on schools and the loss of open space.

A former supervisor also expressed concern that a proposed Outer Connector around Fredericksburg, which would cut through the Dogwood property, may never be built. Dogwood is counting on the Connector to provide transportation access to the new "town center."

At one point, a member of the audience rose to ask those opposed to stand. "Eighty-five to 90 percent stood and cheered," Campi said.

The Spotsylvania Planning Commission will hold an initial public hearing and forward a recommendation on the rezoning to the supervisors. The commission had scheduled the hearing for Sept. 18, but that has now been postponed indefinitely.

Campi said it was because Spotsylvania officials were caught by surprise by the public's reaction. "We've built a momentum," he concluded. "The supervisors and county officials are taking a second look at this."

The poll was conducted Aug. 22-23 by Mason-Dixon Research of Columbia, Md., with a cross-section of 407 Spotsylvania voters aged 18 to 65. Fully 66 percent said they opposed the Dogwood plan.

Caroline Hayden, representing the coalition's Spotsylvania Preservation Foundation, was quoted as saying that residents "realize that Dogwood's plans will erode and further diminish our way of life."

The poll also indicated that 63 percent of residents believe the county is growing too fast, 96 percent said the project will create more congestion on Route 3, 68 percent worried about straining the water supply, and 80 percent predicted that new schools, roads and other infrastructure demanded by the development will adversely impact county finances.

Campi said the Trust was particularly heartened by responses to questions about battlefield preservation. A total of 76 percent of those polled agreed that the county's battlefields, including Chancellorsville, were important tourist attractions. Ninety percent said the county had a responsibility to protect them. And 86 percent said the county should work with preservation groups to guide growth while preserving Spotsylvania's historic sites.

Civil War Preservation Trust

President Jim Lighthizer called the poll results "a wake-up call for Spotsylvania County." And Robert Nieweg, spokesman for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said residents "are saying they've had enough of the haphazard hyper-growth that's turning their community into one big strip mall choked with traffic.

"They want what our coalition wants — to engage in a dialogue that creates a plan for sensible growth that preserves their historical treasures and their quality of life."

The coalition was less successful on another front. John Mitchell, president of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, struck out in his offer to buy the Dogwood tract. The property saw fighting and troop movements on the first day at Chancellorsville, May 1, 1863.

Dogwood has an option on the property. Mitchell met with Smith, Dogwood's president, in mid-August and "asked if he would consider selling all of the property, or at least 300 acres," the portion that saw the greatest battle action. Mitchell said he had also talked to Smith several weeks earlier and warned him to walk away from the project.

"He went back to his investors, or partners, and said nothing was for sale," Mitchell recalled, "and that he was going to proceed with the rezoning."

Mitchell said he hoped that the Aug. 29 meeting, plus the results of the poll, may have given Smith second thoughts. And he warned that with three of the seven supervisors up for election this fall, an electorate weary of high-speed growth may start looking for a change.