

Commission Rejects Plan To Develop Historic Site

New Bristow's Impact On Rte. 28 a Concern

By STEVEN GINSBERG
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Prince William County Planning Commission denied an application last week for a development on historical land that had won the favor of a key Civil War preservation group.

Voting 5 to 3, planning commissioners said the traffic impact of New Bristow Village on Route 28 was enough to lead them to deny a proposal they had all praised for its attention to history and innovative design.

The 341-acre project would be just west and south of Manassas Regional Airport, bounded by Route 28 on the northwest, Bristow Road on the northeast and the Norfolk Southern Railroad tracks on the southeast.

Plans for New Bristow envision a village community with a 19th-century look. It would include up to 520 houses and 175,000 square feet of office and commercial space. The developer, Centex Homes,

also had agreed to dedicate 127 acres of the site as a historical park that would be controlled and operated by the Civil War Preservation Trust. Entrances to the community would be on Bristow Road and Nokesville Road (Route 28).

There is near-universal agreement that Route 28 is in desperate need of improvements to handle what has become a regular rush of traffic. The Virginia Department of Transportation has designated it for improvement, but those plans are now uncertain after VDOT's recent announcement that it is more than \$2 billion shy of funds. VDOT plans to announce this week what projects will be cut from its to-do list.

County officials also have been moving forward with a proposal to fund part of the Route 28 improvements but have put those plans on hold until they know whether VDOT will be able to pay its share of the bill. Without VDOT funds, county officials said they will have to decide whether to cover the \$33 million in improvements themselves, spend \$7 million to make short-term fixes or abandon plans altogether.

In that atmosphere of uncertainty, planning commissioners said they could not approve a project that would further strain Route 28.

"I think most of us thought it was a very good application, but the transportation part of it on [Route] 28 tipped the scales," said Commissioner Billy W. Isbell (Woodbridge). "In good conscience, that was the part we just couldn't swallow—to make something already so bad much worse."

Backers of the proposal said they would make enough traffic improvements, totaling \$1.7 million, to mitigate the extra cars that the project would put on the road.

"This doesn't help" Route 28, said John Foote, an attorney for Centex Homes. "But it doesn't hurt, because we make a number of road improvements as part of this project."

Aside from traffic concerns, New Bristow Village has raised the interest of Civil War buffs because

the development covers the site of the 1863 Battle of Bristoe Station, in which there were nearly 2,000 Union and Confederate casualties.

Civil War enthusiasts, however, are somewhat at odds over the project. A local group has lobbied for a more thorough examination of the grounds because they say that there are no records showing the recovery of about 140 rebel soldiers.

The group did not respond to e-mails seeking comment. On the group's Web site, group members lamented the lack of attention to their concerns by the Planning Commission.

County planners said they have gone to unusual lengths, including the use of infrared scanning, to search for unmarked graves. An archaeologist also will be on site during construction.

The developer also has agreed to cede 127 acres of the site to the Civil War Preservation Trust, whose officials laud the project's attention to history.

"This is a real deal partnership where everybody could win," said Jim Lighthizer, president of the organization. "With all due respect, they made a mistake in not recommending this."

Lighthizer said the trust would turn the land into a low-impact park with interpretative signs about the battle.

Planning Commissioner Hector Quintana (At Large), who voted to approve New Bristow, said the advisory body sent the wrong message to developers when it turned down the project.

"This is exactly the type of cooperation we're trying to get builders and developers to engage in," Quintana said. "We've got someone who goes way beyond the minimums with a quality product that preserves heritage and is environmentally sensitive, and we say no. It sure makes people scratch their heads and wonder what they have to do to get the cooperation of Prince William County to get a development built here."

The Board of County Supervisors, which holds ultimate say over the project, is scheduled to take up the issue March 5.