

Neck Gets Growth Warning

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Rob Hedelt

DON'T BE surprised if signs turn up in the Northern Neck one of these days opposing unrestricted development and senseless sprawl, maybe even with messages like "Don't Fredericksburg the Neck!" or "Don't Chancellor Colonial Beach!"

Last week, at a gathering of Neck officials discussing their region's future, the Fredericksburg region, State Route 3 west and Salem Church were singled out as examples of how growth can rob a region of the beauty and nature that draws visitors and pleases folks who call it home.

The session was organized by officials at George Washington Birthplace National Monument in Westmoreland County. The park is preparing to draw up its own plan for the near future and the workshop was part of a pilot project to work with community leaders identifying the most significant planning issues that face the park outside its fence line. To that end, sessions were designed to get the attention of elected officials, community leaders and other "stakeholders" in the region's future.

Ed McMahon of the Urban Land Institute in D.C. told officials that development and growth doesn't have to be bad. McMahon, who predicted after the session that the Northern Neck had "maybe five years" before large developers now in Northern Virginia turn their attention to the largely undeveloped peninsula, had a simple message: To get better development, find a broad public and political consensus on how the community should look and function, and then stick to it.

In a rambling talk that often had leaders shaking their heads as he flashed up slides of congested, sign-filled, rag-tag development from Pigeon Forge, Tenn., to the State Route 3 corridor in Spotsylvania, McMahon gave the attendees a sobering message. "The image of a community has a fundamental impact on its well being," he said, noting that people have been drawn to the Northern Neck by the beauty of its waterfront, its forests, its farms and the many other largely undisturbed resources. Let development overrun the region, and surround spots like George Washington's Birthplace the way Salem Church was enveloped by growth in Spotsylvania, and the region loses the feel that made it special.

The speaker from the Urban Land Institute cited examples from other communities around the country. He showed the benefits, both to builders and residents, of clustering development in a way that preserved natural areas, parks and green spaces. He noted how saving trees during development, something with higher costs upfront, can improve vistas for homeowners and actually give builders a better return in the end. Narrower streets, better landscaping, inclusion of recreational common areas in developments, preservation around parks and historic ground are things communities can either require or recommend.

In some instances, he said putting up buildings that look like they belong in a region like the Northern Neck is as simple as asking and demanding them. He showed examples of McDonald's restaurants in New England and in the Southwest where the fast-food restaurants were housed in buildings that looked just like the rest of the neighborhood.

He noted that big corporations like McDonald's or Wal-Mart will "come in with the typical building, Plan A or Plan B. But if you demand it and it makes business sense for them to locate in your community, these big companies can be talked into Plan C." He said in some cases, just having a pamphlet or set of suggested architectural guidelines can steer developers toward the type of buildings that look like they belong.

It was just one man and one group's opinion, but much of what McMahon said made sense. Especially set against the backdrop of development here, which is creeping closer toward the Northern Neck each day.