

'Downtown' project planned for Route 10, Courthouse

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

More than a decade after the 2008 recession thwarted the county government's plans for a regional mall near the Route 10/288 interchange, a different type of project is poised to bring economic stimulus to the Dale District.

A group of developers headed by Florida-based Dunphy Properties has applied to rezone 124 acres adjacent to the Chesterfield County courts building for an upscale mixed-use project known as Courthouse Landing.

Billed as "Chesterfield's New Downtown," the development proposal integrates high-density residential (apartments and townhomes), retail, hotel and office uses with outdoor gathering areas and bicycle/pedestrian accommodations to create a sense of urban living in the suburbs.

"Unlike some other areas in the county, this area has not seen much growth in commercial or residential investment in the last 10 years. It needs new investment and new rooftops to enhance

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BIKE SHOP BREWS:
WHERE CYCLISTS, DOGS
AND BEER LOVERS MEET
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JENNY McQUEEN



ASH DANIEL

How far can Chase run?

Chesterfield's firebrand state senator plans a statewide run. But first, she has to win a battle in her own backyard

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

The sun has almost set on a mild early fall evening as Amanda Chase exits Swift Creek Middle School, flanked by an entourage that includes her husband, her campaign manager and about a dozen supporters.

A few hours earlier, the state senator learned she had been exiled from the Chesterfield County Republican Committee for allegedly violating the state party's prohibition against supporting the opponent of a GOP nominee. True to form, she decides not to go quietly.

Chase attended the committee's September meeting, after which she conducts an impromptu press conference in a foyer adjacent to the school auditorium. She finishes speaking to the camera crews from two Richmond television stations,

then spots an Observer reporter on her way out of the building and begins blasting the local Republican establishment for going out of its way to hinder her reelection campaign.

As committee members file past her, Chase insists she is hated by her own party's leaders in the General Assembly for her commitment to transparency, opposition to backroom deals and willingness to hold people accountable on both sides of the political aisle.

"They're furious with me and they're terrified I'm gonna go higher - that's why [critics] are coming out of the woodwork this year like they never have," she says.

Under pressure from within her own party, Republican state Sen. Amanda Chase, the self-proclaimed "redneck from Chesterfield," says she knows how to win - by refusing to compromise conservative values and standing up for constituents.

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COURTHOUSE LANDING from page 1



JAMES HASKINS

Florida-based developer Dunphy Properties has applied to rezone a 124-acre parcel at the intersection of Iron Bridge and Courthouse roads, where it wants to build an upscale mixed-use project with apartments, townhomes, a hotel and retail and office space.

spending and economic growth,” said Garrett Hart, the county’s economic development director, in an email Monday morning.

According to Hart, the county is trying to leverage a prime location to spark economic activity along the Route 10 corridor between Chippenham Parkway and state Route 288 – the same blueprint it used in the successful redevelopment of the former Cloverleaf Mall property – and bolster its commercial tax base.

“This part of the county needs the type of development that will attract young people – a place where living, working and shopping does not always have to include a car ride,” he said.

Construction of a hotel on the property is a priority for the county because of its proximity to a major highway and the Chesterfield Airport, which is in the middle of a runway extension project to accommodate larger aircraft. There’s also a scarcity of medical office buildings along that stretch of Route 10.

Courthouse Landing “has to tie into the overall vision for that area,” said Michael Jackson, chairman of the Chesterfield Planning Commission and a longtime Dale District resident.

The Board of Supervisors approved a transfer of about half (59 acres) of the 124-acre site to the Chesterfield Economic Development Authority in April. The county had owned the land since 1974.

The other 65 acres previously housed the Spencer Brothers gas station and are still privately owned.

The day after the EDA took ownership of the 59 acres in August, developer Jim Dunphy filed an application with the county’s Planning Department, seeking to rezone the 124-acre site for as many as 500 apartments and 250 townhomes, a 150-room hotel, up to 350,000 square feet of retail space and approximately 200,000 square feet of office and medical uses.

The zoning case was scheduled to be heard Oct. 15 by the planning commission, but after citizens expressed concern at a community meeting last month about traffic and potential impact on the nearby O.B. Gates Elementary School, the applicant decided to ask for a 30-day deferral.

“We want a good finished product. We’re not interested in rushing to get done on some artificial timetable that doesn’t make sense,” said Jackson, who insisted all citizens will have an opportunity to weigh in on the case.

Some Chesterfield residents argue the EDA exists specifically to limit transparency about proposed developments. They say only about 50 people attended the Sept. 23 community meeting because planning staff placed only one sign on the property advertising the meeting and hardly anybody knew about it.

“It seems so wrong the way they operate – the state gives EDAs the authority to keep everything secret,” said Mike Uzel, founder of the citizen group Bermuda Advocates for Responsible Development.

BARD rallied opposition to a proposed 1,675-acre industrial megasite in south Chester last year, which ultimately led the EDA to withdraw its zoning application.

Unlike that project, Uzel acknowledged Courthouse Landing “may be a great thing for the county.”

“Why not just be up front and let the chips fall where they may?” he asked. “I guess they figured they could slip it by us.”

Hart said it’s no secret that the EDA has been marketing the property to developers since the early to mid-2000s.

When he came to work for the county in 2006, it was working with the Atlanta-based North American Properties to secure development of a regional mall at the 288 interchange.

The deal had stalled because of the cost of needed transportation improvements on Courthouse Road and Route 10. There’s also a large number of wetlands on the site, a gas line easement that must be avoided and possible soil contamination from the previous gas station operation that needs to be tested for and cleaned up by whoever develops the property.

Negotiations continued through 2008, Hart said, and the project was about to come to fruition when the recession hit and “ended the idea of large regional malls forever.”

Since then, the EDA has tried to entice numerous developers with various incentives that were part of the mall deal, including a discount on the purchase price of the 59-acre parcel to offset the cost of road improvements.

In the meantime, the property has produced no tax revenue or return on the county’s investment for nearly 50 years.

“This is far from an easy site to develop,” Hart said. “Combine that with lower income and spending numbers than other areas in the county and you can see why it has been nearly impossible to get a project going on this site.” ■

CHASE from page 1

Higher than the Virginia Senate?

“I’m planning to run for governor in 2025,” she adds. “I am. I’m doing it.”

Before President Donald Trump completed his ascension from reality TV star to leader of the free world in November 2016, a one-term state senator contemplating a bid for Virginia’s executive mansion would have been considered audacious at best. Now, it seems, nearly anything is possible.

Conservative firebrand and Trump acolyte Corey Stewart was a member of the Prince William County Board of Supervisors when he ran for governor in 2017 and came within a whisker of beating out Ed Gillespie for the Republican nomination.

Like the president, Chase has cast herself as an outspoken political outsider. In the process, she has built a base of devoted supporters across the traditionally conservative-leaning 11th Senate District, which includes part of Chesterfield and Amelia counties and the city of Colonial Heights.

“I think by and large, her perspective and approach to challenges is certainly like Trump,” said veteran Richmond political analyst Bob Holsworth. “They don’t see themselves as part of the establishment. She’s kind of the outlaw politician. There is an attraction to that for a number of people who have very strong anti-government sentiments right now.”

Chase wants to help other candidates follow her blueprint. First, though, she needs to defeat Democratic challenger Amanda Pohl on Nov. 5 to secure a second four-year term in the state Senate. It remains to be seen if making enemies within the Republican Party will help Chase in that regard or hurt her.

Chase has become a lightning rod for criticism in 2019, embroiled in multiple controversies – including an ongoing feud with Chesterfield’s popular sheriff, Karl Leonard – that have made the 11th District race more competitive than anyone could’ve imagined even a year ago.

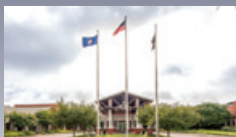
Campaign finance reports submitted last month indicate Pohl, a first-time candidate, outraised Chase by \$50,000 in July and August and had about \$26,000 more cash on hand.

“We’re trying to retain [a slim majority in] the state Senate. Going into this election cycle, I thought there were four [vulnerable GOP Senate seats across the state] and this wasn’t one of them,” says Jack Wilson, chairman of the Republican Party of Virginia, in an interview after last week’s CCRC meeting.

“What worries me is, because of this dissension in the party, the Democrats perhaps see an opening, then all of a sudden what was a very safe seat becomes competitive. That’s fine. We can run it and Amanda [Chase] can still win it, but that takes resources away from other seats that we knew were competitive.”

“We don’t need this,” Wilson adds. “But she has her campaign. She’s doing what she thinks she needs to do to win. Likewise, the sheriff is running for reelection and he’s going to do what he thinks he needs to do to win.”

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CHESTERFIELD
Observer

Chase and Leonard verbally sparred last month after she posted a video of his opponent, Rahn Kersey, on her campaign Facebook page, which the sheriff views as a tacit endorsement of Kersey's candidacy.

Kersey, a former Capitol Police sergeant who is running for county sheriff as an independent, has endorsed Chase and also posted a photo of himself with the senator on his personal Facebook page.

Chase maintains she never endorsed Kersey's campaign. But she did suggest that Kersey, a Christian conservative, is "more of a Republican" than Leonard, who declined to endorse Chase after she was accused of berating and cursing at a Capitol Police officer in March.

That comment was one of the justifications cited by Tara Carroll, chairwoman of the Chesterfield County Republican Committee, in her Sept. 27 letter calling for Chase to immediately come into compliance with the state party plan or face removal from the local committee.

"Over the last several weeks, you and your campaign have promoted the candidacy of an independent candidate who is running against our Republican nominee for sheriff," reads Carroll's letter. "Furthermore, you appear to have recently escalated the situation by introducing the independent candidate for sheriff to numerous people at a public event and by launching a social media attack campaign against our Republican nominee, Sheriff Leonard.

"These are actions that the Republican Party will not condone," the letter continues. "While there is an expectation that members of the CCRC will support all of our nominees for public office, there is a requirement that no member publicly support any candidate in a general election who is running against one of our nominees."

Carroll sent Chase a second letter three days later, informing her that her CCRC membership was being revoked effective immediately.

Carroll didn't respond to a request for comment from the Observer last week.

Leonard calls the situation "unfortunate" and wishes Chase "would've let this whole thing go away."

"You have a small group of people who have made this decision. The entire

committee and all the members have not had an opportunity to weigh in on this or hear my side," Chase says after last week's GOP meeting.

"The action they took tonight is going to hurt the Republican Party. There are a lot of really good people in the committee, but I had no idea how disconnected the establishment leadership is from actual voting Republicans. There's a big chasm of who's in touch with what real, everyday Republicans support."

"You know what I hear when I go door-to-door? People are tired of all the squabbling and in-fighting. They're tired of Republicans eating their own. That's exactly what's going on here," she adds.

Chase is hosting a Saturday morning open house for supporters at her campaign headquarters in a shopping center off Iron Bridge Road, about a half mile from the county government complex. The walls are lined with district maps, broken into 11th District precincts, and stacks of yard signs sit near the front door. There's stew and cornbread on a table in a room with about two dozen folding chairs, and Chase is working the room in red jeans and a leather jacket, warning of a political apocalypse if the Republicans keep losing seats in the General Assembly.

"Everybody thinks this is the most critical election. We lose one seat [the GOP barely controls the state Senate 21-19] and we have no checks and balances in place," Chase tells an Observer reporter, seeming to speak indirectly to supporters standing nearby.

If the Democrats take over the entire government, she says, all hell will break loose: "They are killing babies in the third trimester. There will be so many restrictions in place ... it's going to be too much trouble for law-abiding citizens to conceal and carry."

This is why it's imperative, she says, for Republicans to stand up for their values. While the GOP establishment shifts away from the conservative creed, she is literally sticking to her guns.

Chase, who has a concealed carry permit, created a stir during the 2019 General Assembly session when she wore her .38-caliber revolver in a holster on her right

hip while presenting her bills in the Senate Privileges and Elections Committee.

She also vehemently opposed Medicaid expansion and a resolution introduced by fellow Sen. Glen Sturtevant (R-Richmond) calling for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which she claims would "enshrine abortion [rights] in the [state] constitution."

At her open house, Chase spends considerable time chastising Leonard for making Chesterfield a "sanctuary city" through his refusal to detain and hold illegal immigrants for federal immigration enforcement. (The sheriff disputes her contention and insists he is complying with the law.)

When asked how her politics jibe with Chesterfield's changing demographics, and the large numbers of non-English-speaking residents in the county, she says, "I'm all for immigrants. I'm all for legal immigrants."

Chase supporter Tess Graf, 44, a chiropractor from Chester, is unfazed by the senator's split from the local Republican committee.

"She's always done what she says she's going to do," says Graf, who has donated to Chase's campaign. "I'm big on the Second Amendment, abortion, the immigration issue. If you are here illegally, you are a criminal."

"I'm glad they kicked her out. Sen. Chase is what the Republican Party used to be," adds Dave Hoopsick, a Chase supporter from Colonial Heights who attended the open house.

A longtime Republican who says he abandoned the party in January, Hoopsick, 56, now identifies as a Libertarian. He says the GOP has been shifting too far left, and it's the reason Republicans are barely hanging on to majorities in the statehouse.

Glen Magnotta, a 56-year-old who lives in Chesterfield's Deer Run subdivision, is a longtime Republican, but he also intends to back Chase no matter what.

"Even if she put an 'I' in front of her name, that's OK. She's always looking out for the people," he says.

If Chase does decide to run for governor, it's an open question whether she'll do so as a member of the GOP.

She's currently serving as an adviser to a startup company, America's Ticket, that her campaign manager, Philip Search, co-founded with friend Timothy Baker. The web-based platform aims to "transform politics" by giving ordinary citizens the

tools they need to run for elected office.

For a subscription fee, America's Ticket will provide support in fundraising, communications, logistics and polling, helping grassroots candidates who lack financial backing from an established political party.

"Where I think we stand out is that we're not influenced by any political parties, special interests, big corporations or media," Baker stated in a February 2019 story published by the digital media and events company American Inno. "We're really looking out for the voters and helping aspiring candidates have the opportunity to run a successful campaign and communicate with their constituents in real time."

Chase was one of those candidates four years ago. Despite her work on behalf of Republican politicians such as Ken Cuccinelli, Eric Cantor and Dave Brat, Chase had little money and even less support from the local party when she decided to challenge longtime incumbent Steve Martin for the GOP nomination in the 11th Senate District. But her conservative message resonated with voters in Chesterfield, Colonial Heights and Amelia; she won the Republican primary, then easily beat local attorney Wayne Powell in the 2015 general election.

"I'm tired of the GOP mafia controlling who are the winners and losers in these elections," Chase says. "I'm going to help get the best candidates for office instead of the ones party bosses pick for us to choose from on Election Day."

Addressing supporters at her open house, Chase acknowledges she takes it as a compliment whenever someone compares her to Trump.

"I am 100 percent behind our president," she says, drawing an "Amen" from the audience. "I think he's doing a great job. We need more real people in politics, and less politicians."

While Chase's profile is certainly strong in her district, Holsworth finds it hard to see the Trumpian brand of politics translating well in a run for governor.

"The kind of Republican candidates that are doing best in Virginia can appeal to moderates and business folks," he says, noting the GOP hasn't won a statewide campaign since 2009.

In fact, Holsworth says, Chase's style "doesn't fly in parts of Chesterfield. Certainly the Republican Party needs grassroots support, but they need grassroots support in ... suburban areas. Trump has become toxic in these areas in Virginia."

"If you take a look at Republicans right now outside of her, they are talking about preexisting conditions, they are talking about limiting gun rights, they are talking about supporting various gun safety restrictions, taking positions that are odds with what has been the orthodoxy of the party," he adds.

As for her chances in 2025? Chase dismisses the notion that she needs to moderate her political platform in order to win statewide.

"The Republicans have forgotten how to win races, but I know how to win," she says. "I've done it." ■

— Editor Scott Bass contributed to this story



ASH DANIEL

State Sen. Amanda Chase talks with supporters during an open house on Saturday at her campaign headquarters on Iron Bridge Road.

SEN. CHASE UNDER FIRE FOR FACEBOOK COMMENT ON GUNS, SEXUAL ASSAULT
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VOLUME 24, NUMBER 28 | YOUR COUNTY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1995 | CHESTERFIELDOBSERVER.COM | JULY 10, 2019

Boat owners rocked by tax bills

Assessment change leads to sudden spike

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Wayne Jones was surprised when he opened his 2019 personal property tax bill from Chesterfield County and noticed the annual assessment for his 2011 Sea Hunt boat had jumped by more than \$8,000.

The 18-foot watercraft, which Jones purchased new with a trailer for \$20,000, was assessed at \$2,280 in 2018. Jones' tax bill was \$82.08.

This year, it was assessed at \$10,511. With the county's personal property tax rate at \$3.60 per \$100 of assessed value, that increased Jones' tax liability on a depreciating asset by nearly \$300 in a 12-month period.

"I was expecting [the assessment] to be less than it was before," Jones said in a telephone interview last week. "I know I'm not the only one in that boat – if the county raised mine that much, I'm pretty sure they did the same thing to everyone else."

Indeed, many Chesterfield residents have seen significant increases in their personal property tax

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JENNY McQUEEN

CURDS AND WHEY

FLEX YOUR CHEESE-MAKING MUSCLES AND MAKE THE MOZZ OF SUMMER Page 8



JAMES HASKINS

Breaking the burbs

Can the county carve out an urban oasis in Midlothian's wealthiest suburb?

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Pedestrian-friendly, high-density development such as Winterfield Crossing, at the intersection of Winterfield Road and Midlothian Turnpike, is an integral part of the county's broader vision for the village of Midlothian. Some nearby residents, however, see such density as disruptive.

Handwritten in green Sharpie, one citizen comment registered at a community meeting late last month illustrates a challenge county leaders face as they seek public support for their vision of a denser, more pedestrian-friendly Midlothian village.

"We don't want to be a city," it reads. "We moved here to get away from the city."

As county leaders and planning staff begin the process of introducing a special area plan to guide long-term development in the village, meetings such as this one – held at First Baptist Church of Midlothian on Westfield Road – are a critical first step. They're a chance for citizens to provide feedback. And while much of the feedback has been positive, other residents have

expressed concern that county planners' quest for more urban-style density will destroy the Midlothian they know and love.

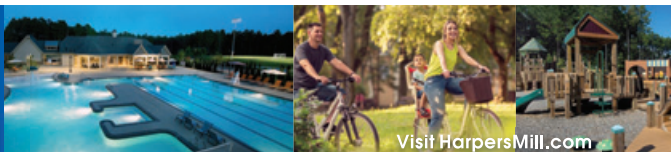
More than two years in the making, the Midlothian Community Special Area Plan is still in draft form, meaning it has yet to be approved by the Board of Supervisors. But the master plan is a well-manicured document that spans more than 100 pages. It encourages dense, mixed-use development: residential apartments stacked atop retail shops, interconnected sidewalks, and urban streetscapes with city-style pop-up parks sprinkled in.

To grow the county's tax base, and create more sustainable communities, county leaders

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MIDLOTHIAN from page 1

say Chesterfield needs to attract younger workers, who are increasingly choosing to settle in urban areas like Richmond instead of the suburbs. The Midlothian special area plan is an attempt to change that.

But change isn't likely to come easy. Awash with large houses on tree-lined cul-de-sacs, western Midlothian is the county's most affluent community, and some homeowners see urban-style development as irreparably harming their quiet, suburban lifestyle. To many, the suburbs represent an escape from the city.

During a meeting last year in Salisbury, one of the county's wealthiest subdivisions, Midlothian District Supervisor Leslie Haley fielded such complaints when she met with a large group of Salisbury residents who thought the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, was subsidizing construction of a new low-income apartment complex on the outskirts of their neighborhood along Winterfield Road. (It wasn't.)

While Haley and developer Guy Blundon assured attendees the 246-unit Midlothian Town Center apartments would be "an asset to the community," more than one person suggested the area already has been negatively affected by increased traffic and other issues related to a post-recession proliferation of multifamily housing.

County data indicates 38% of all residential buildings three stories or taller in Chesterfield are located in the village of Midlothian. The special area plan calls for even more, prioritizing density and a diverse mix of residential options necessary to slow vehicle speeds on Midlothian Turnpike. Slowing the traffic down, in turn, creates the pedestrian-friendly environment that would support small, village-scale businesses.

"We need to have more than just single-family detached houses," said local architect and Salisbury resident Randy Holmes, who was part of a team Haley formed to help craft the 116-page document. Holmes also helped Haley present the plan during the June 25 community meeting at First Baptist Church.

"We want a variety and a range of housing types – duplexes, triplexes, things that allow for both rental and purchase and at various price points and scales so that a young person can afford to live here," he added. "It also will allow older people to downsize from the house they raised their kids in to something smaller and more manageable."

While Holmes was speaking, a few citizens in the audience of about 150 shook their heads. One woman looked as if she had just smelled something unpleasant. But as she seeks a second term on the Board of Supervisors in November, Haley has thrown her full support behind the Midlothian plan, seemingly unconcerned about upsetting some potential voters in an election year.

"This isn't my plan – it's the community's plan, and it's the best thing for the future of the village," she said after the June 25 meeting, noting that staff in the county's Planning Department compiled about 3,000 citizen comments during a 28-month public outreach period.

County leaders have seen the demographic data. They know they need to bring in younger workers to lure job-producing companies to Chesterfield and backfill the tax base as the population ages. The alternative is becoming disproportionately dependent on retirees, who generally have less disposable income and generate less tax revenue, to fund local programs and services.

The county's Planning Department projects that



JAMES HASKINS

To create density and increase street-level pedestrian activity, developments such as Winterfield Crossing stack residential apartments on top of retail shops. The density helps cut down on vehicular traffic and improve walkability.

"Midlothian Turnpike has gotten a little pudgy over the years. It's essentially a sea of asphalt with a little bit of sidewalk. It's not the most inviting thing in the world."

– Jesse Smith, Chesterfield County transportation director

Chesterfield will have more than 91,000 residents age 65 or older by 2045. That's more than twice as many as there were in 2015. At that point, seniors are expected to make up approximately 21% of the county's total population.

Convincing those younger workers to put down roots in Chesterfield is difficult at this point, though, because the sprawling county was largely developed in a manner that doesn't mesh with the way many millennials prefer to live. Despite recent public investment in miles of sidewalks, it's not particularly pedestrian-friendly and has fewer convenient entertainment options than nearby Richmond.

"Millennials are very attracted to the notion of living where they work or being able to walk or bike to work," Holmes said. "We want to have a village that encourages that kind of lifestyle."

Many of the people who provided input into the Midlothian special area plan over the past two years expressed a strong preference for improving walkability within the village. Accomplishing that goal will require citizens to accept that "density" is no longer a dirty word in some parts of Chesterfield.

"Density has unfortunately been a long-feared term. It's only once people can see it that they realize, 'Oh, this is [similar to] where I go on vacation. This is where I want to be when I'm looking for great places [to visit]," said Dave Anderson, a principal planner with the local engineering firm Timmons Group.

According to the county's planning director, Andy Gillies, there are 771 apartment units and 427 townhomes either under construction or recently approved for zoning within the boundaries of Midlothian village,

which, under the new draft plan, covers an 8-square-mile area from Route 288 to Falling Creek and Salisbury to Lucks Lane.

Nearly 500 of the apartment units and 200 of the townhomes will be built along the southernmost stretch of Winterfield Road, a two-lane road that many Salisbury residents use to access Midlothian Turnpike. That area wasn't considered part of the village when the most recent Midlothian Area Community Plan was adopted by the Board of Supervisors in 1989.

Those figures don't include the 838 apartment units that have been approved in three different developments

around the Westchester Commons shopping center. Those apartments fall just outside the village's new western boundary.

Three owner-occupied condominium projects also are planned in the "village core" area, adding residential density that Haley thinks will help attract the type of village-scale commercial development that citizens want.

"There were people at the community meetings who are looking at the [village] as a potential business opportunity because there's going to be the density to support their business model," she said.

Amy Satterfield, president of the Village of Midlothian Volunteer Coalition, a citizen group that has worked for the past 30 years to shape the character of development in the village and preserve its small-town feel, said the new plan "challenges people's concepts about density."

"If you want a walkable community, if you want a place where small businesses thrive, you have to have enough people living there," she added. "That will be the hardest component to get the community on board with."

Unless they do, the state is unlikely to go along with the county's plan to put a 3.75-mile stretch of Midlothian Turnpike on what Holmes referred to as a "diet."

The Midlothian special area plan calls for maintaining the turnpike as a four-lane road, but building a raised median with street trees and reducing the width of each lane as a natural traffic-calming device. The county's Transportation Department also has a plan to encourage through traffic heading west on Route 60 to use North Woolridge Road and bypass the village altogether.

Because the Virginia Department of Transportation classifies Midlothian Turnpike as a major arterial, it has long been unwilling to reduce the speed limit in the village, which is needed to make it safer for people to walk and bike there. But Jesse Smith, the county's transportation director, noted the state agency has been engaged throughout the development of the plan and generally supports the county's proposed changes once there is sufficient population density.

"Like a lot of us, Midlothian Turnpike has gotten a little pudgy over the years. It's essentially a sea of asphalt with a little bit of sidewalk. It's not the most inviting thing in the world. There's really no way for pedestrians to get across the road," Smith said at the June 25 community meeting.

"One thing we've heard loud and clear is people don't want to be tethered to their cars anymore. They want to have different mobility options," he added. "That's the idea of a village: the synergy of mixed uses, it all needs to work together." ■

Observer

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'A better place'?

Commission, citizens at odds over Carvana

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Following a public hearing that lasted more than two hours last Tuesday night, for nearly 20 seconds there was total silence in the county's Public Meeting Room.

Bermuda District planning commissioner Gib Sloan shuffled the papers laid out in front of him not once, but twice. He tapped his pen several times on the dais, clearly searching for the most delicate way to tell a large group of Chesterfield residents something they didn't want to hear.

In the audience sat more than 150 citizens, who had stayed past 10:30 p.m. to see how the Chesterfield Planning Commission would vote on a rezoning application from online vehicle retailer Carvana.

All 28 of the people who spoke at the commission's public hearing opposed the company's proposal to rezone a 183-acre Woods Edge Road property with conditional use for a 200,000-square-foot vehicle inspection center and 9,000-space storage lot.

The four commissioners present ultimately deadlocked 2-2, deferring the case to their August meeting, but not before Sloan methodically explained why Carvana's project would

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ALL THE FUZZ DURING PEAK PEACH SEASON, CHUTNEY JAMS *Page 6*



JENNY McQUEEN



ASH DANIEL

THE GOLDEN RUSH

Amid an age wave, county leaders face a looming challenge: sustaining senior tax relief

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Gloria Wells, 87, likely wouldn't be able to remain at her home in Lake Crystal Farms if it weren't for the senior tax relief program. Last year, her real estate tax bill would have cost her \$1,700 without the waiver.

Gloria Wells turns 88 on Oct. 7. She plans to celebrate her birthday at the same Lake Crystal Farms home where she has lived for the past 54 years.

"I feel safe here by myself – that's a big thing," says Wells, sitting in the dining room of the well-maintained four-bedroom rancher she and her husband purchased for \$20,500 in 1965. Her husband, Ronald, passed away a decade ago.

"I know the house ... even in the dark I know it because I've been here so long," she adds with a smile. "It's full of memories of my kids and my husband. I wouldn't last long if I couldn't stay here."

Being able to live independently well into her golden years "means everything" to Wells. She drives herself to the grocery store, doctor's appointments and her beloved Central Baptist Church, which is located just across Courthouse Road from her neighborhood.

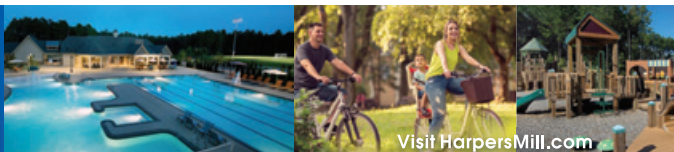
Wells isn't planning to slow down any time soon – her mother lived to 95 – but it's unlikely she'd still be able to own her home if not for the county's real estate tax relief program for senior citizens.

Because her only source of income is \$15,000 in annual Social Security payments, Wells qualifies for a 100% waiver of her local real estate

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SENIOR TAX RELIEF *from page 1*

tax liability. With her property assessed at \$182,600 this year, that represents a savings of more than \$1,700.

“This is real to people,” says Chesterfield Commissioner of the Revenue Jenefer Hughes, whose office administers the senior tax relief program. “Even if you’ve paid off your home, you still get a real estate tax bill every six months. To not have to come up with an extra \$1,000 to pay that bill is huge.”

Waiving millions of dollars in real estate taxes is also a significant commitment for the local government. For fiscal year 2020, which began July 1, the county has budgeted \$9 million for real estate tax relief for seniors and permanently disabled veterans. That’s equivalent to a little less than 3 cents on Chesterfield’s real estate tax rate.

According to Meghan Coates, director of the county’s Budget and Management Department, that number is projected to hit \$12.6 million by fiscal year 2024. As the county braces for the impending “age wave,” a term used to describe the large number of baby boomers entering their retirement years, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the senior tax relief program could become a daunting proposition.

The county’s Planning Department projects the number of Chesterfield residents age 65 and older will nearly double, from 42,500 to 80,000, between now and 2030. By 2045, it’s expected to hit 91,000.

“To the extent we can extend benefits to our seniors, we want to be able to do that,” says Leslie Haley, chairwoman of the Board of Supervisors. “But when you see the [demographic data], it’s potentially a significant impact. We can’t ignore that.”

To qualify for the program, county residents must be age 65 or older and live in the home for which they are requesting tax relief. They also must have no more than \$52,000 in annual income and \$350,000 in assets (not including the value of their home).

Tax relief is administered on a sliding scale, based on income: residents earning up to \$27,200 annually receive 100%; it falls to 60% for those earning between \$27,201 and \$37,000, and 35% for those with income between

\$37,001 and \$52,000.

Applications must be submitted or renewed by April 1 to qualify for the program in a given year.

Hughes acknowledges it’s not uncommon for residents to move into a lower tax relief bracket – or be disqualified from the program altogether – from one year to the next.

So far this year, her office has received 71 applications from people who didn’t qualify because their income exceeded the \$52,000 limit. Of those, 14 had participated in the program in 2018.

“I’d love to have the flexibility to say, ‘If you’re \$10 over [the income threshold], we’ll let it go,’” Hughes says. “But my office only administers the program. I have absolutely no authority to make changes to it.”

Marjorie Henderson, a resident of the Garland Heights subdivision, says she was denied real estate tax relief this year because she made a one-time withdrawal from her pension to make repairs to her home. Because that money was classified as income, it pushed her over the \$52,000 threshold.

“I don’t think seniors should be penalized for that,” she adds. “What am I supposed to do, let my house go and not fix it when something breaks?”

Henderson, who works part-time and receives Social Security in addition to her pension, recently contacted Dale District Supervisor Jim Holland and inquired about the possibility of raising the income limit so more seniors would qualify for tax relief.

For tax year 2019, Henrico County set the maximum taxable income for its senior tax relief program, called the Real Estate Advantage Program, or REAP, at \$75,000. Qualified participants can have no more than \$400,000 in net worth (excluding home value) to participate. Henrico’s program also caps a participant’s real estate exemption at \$3,000 annually.

Chesterfield had a \$2,000 exemption cap on its 60% and 35% tiers until 2014, when the Board of Supervisors eliminated it in conjunction with changes to the three income thresholds.

At that time, the board decreased the income limit for the 100% tier from \$37,000 to the current \$27,200 and expanded the 35% tier

to cover incomes between \$39,000 and \$52,000.

During an April 2018 work session, Matoaca District Supervisor Steve Elswick recalled the changes were made to “sustain [the program] over the long run” and account for increased cost associated with the aging population.

Holland has expressed support for resetting the income tiers for senior tax relief after 2014 levels.

Haley, who wasn’t elected to the Board of Supervisors until 2015, calls it a “balancing act.”

“We need to be mindful of the rest of our citizens, as well,” she says. “We can’t expect them to carry the entire [real estate] tax burden.”

At the direction of the Board of Supervisors, the county’s citizens budget advisory committee will be exploring the topic of senior tax relief over the coming months along with students pursuing master’s degrees in public administration from Virginia Commonwealth University.

For the capstone project, the students will study Chesterfield’s demographics and help develop a model for projecting the long-term cost of the tax relief program.

“I can’t imagine we’d ever find ourselves in a position where we say this program doesn’t exist anymore,” Coates says. “The board knows it’s important to the seniors who live here and want to be able to prepare well in advance for that growth so we’ll be able to accommodate it over the course of time.”

In the short term, Hughes is trying to increase her office’s communication efforts and outreach to the local senior community, hoping to connect with people who potentially could benefit from reducing their annual real estate tax bills.

She thinks the number of participants hasn’t yet mirrored the growth in the senior population – there were 3,973 in 2017, 3,874 in 2018 and 3,154 people have been approved so far this year – because “very few people” know Chesterfield offers such tax relief.

“We see the human side in the people who come into our office looking for help,” Hughes says. “I’m not trying to create problems for the county, but it’s an important program. I would like more people to know about it.” ■



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–Leslie Haley,
Board of Supervisors
chairwoman

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