

The Herald-Mail

<http://www.herald-mail.com/>



Preserving the Camp Ritchie parade ground, shown in this March 2008 photo, is one of the goals of a lawsuit holding up redevelopment at the former Fort Ritchie U.S. Army base. Development plans included two office buildings on the parade ground. **(Credit: File photo /)**

06/20/2010

Former fort's economic limbo has wide impact

By HEATHER KEELS

heather.keels@herald-mail.com

CASCADE — More than six months after a judge's order brought redevelopment efforts at the former Fort Ritchie to a standstill, local officials say the delay is having a wider economic impact that includes holding up several other nearby projects.

Developers' plans for major restaurants, department stores and a motel in nearby Washington Township, Pa., were based on projections that Fort Ritchie's redevelopment would soon bring more traffic and residents to the area, Washington Township Manager Michael Christopher said. Now, all those plans have entered a holding pattern while developers and their lenders wait for confirmation that the Fort Ritchie project will proceed, he said.

"We thought that by now, there would be a number of jobs up there, and as a result, Washington Township Boulevard was constructed, all these businesses were lined up waiting, and nothing's happened," Christopher said.

Fort Ritchie, a former U.S. Army base at the northeast corner of Washington County, was closed in 1998, and has been transferred to Corporate Office Properties Trust, a Columbia, Md., company that planned a business and residential development at the site.

However, in response to a lawsuit brought by two area residents, a federal judge ordered Nov. 10 that the Fort Ritchie redevelopment project be put on hold until the Army re-examines the plan's environmental impact.

Area property owners Jim Lemon and Robin Biser alleged in the suit that COPT's redevelopment plan called for a higher development intensity level than the scenarios the Army evaluated in its Environmental Impact Statement in 1998, and Royce C. Lamberth, chief judge for the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, ordered that document to be revisited.

The Army must issue either a supplemental EIS, addressing significant impacts of the COPT plan beyond those already addressed, or make a convincing case that no supplemental EIS is needed, Lamberth wrote.

COPT has been working with the Army to provide additional information for environmental studies, but how long that process will take remains unclear, said Doris J. Nipps, executive director of PenMar Development Corp., a state-created nonprofit organization overseeing the transition of Fort Ritchie to civilian uses.

COPT Senior Vice President Charles J. Fiala said he could not discuss details of the process other than to say that COPT is in compliance with the court order.

"We look forward to a quick resolution of this litigation so we can move forward with our redevelopment plans and returning jobs to Fort Ritchie," Fiala said in an e-mailed statement forwarded by spokeswoman

Nancy Chaney.

William D. Hofmann, senior property and environmental services manager for COPT, said in April that COPT hoped to have the matter resolved by the end of the year, but declined to comment for this story.

L. Michael Ross, president of the Franklin County Area Development Corp., said he thought there was "optimism, but no confidence" that it would be wrapped up soon.

Ross said economic development officials had hoped that by now, Fort Ritchie would have seen its first multitenant office complex and a significant tenant in place.

COPT has a track record of working closely with the defense and security sector, the target market for the redeveloped Fort Ritchie, Ross said.

"Had the economy not gone south on us and this lawsuit not been hanging on, we would certainly hope to have some new buildings up here by this time and new businesses here on the property, and a couple hundred jobs, if not more than that," Nipps said.

COPT said previously that its plans include 1.7 million square feet of office space, 673 homes and apartments, a hotel and conference center, day-care facility, lakeside nature trails, and baseball and soccer fields.

Nipps said the unresolved legal issue has made it difficult to market the property, adding to frustration already created by the slow economy.

The Hagerstown-Washington County Economic Development Commission is prepared to help market the property, but has not cranked up its promotional efforts because of the lawsuit, Deputy Director Robin L. Ferree said.

"There have been businesses that have looked at this facility and have shied away from it because of this legal issue, and that is very sad, I think, for the community around Cascade," Nipps said. "People who have businesses have been so heavily impacted by the closing of the fort, and now this whole legal situation has made it a whole lot worse."

The Biser-Lemon lawsuit is the latest in a series of legal battles and other obstacles to redevelopment.

In 2005, more than 750 residents of Cascade and surrounding areas signed a petition started by three area business owners that said the delay in redevelopment was affecting the quality of life in the area.

"This circle 10 miles around Fort Ritchie was dependent on all those thousands of jobs that were up there before, and now those babies is gone, and a lot of folks would like to see them come back," Christopher said.

The lawsuit's plaintiffs have said they agree redevelopment is needed, but are concerned about issues such as potential flooding caused by additional impervious surface and the construction of office buildings on the fort's historic parade grounds.

"We certainly support that the place is being redeveloped," Lemon said after the stop-work order was issued. "It's just sitting there and is slowly deteriorating, and that needs to be corrected. But we want them to do it according to the law."

Reader Comments:

Please note: The Herald-Mail does not review every comment posted by our visitors, and we are not responsible for the content of the messages. The postings are the sole responsibility of the poster. We reserve the right to review, edit and/or delete any message for any reason, including but not limited to postings that are commercial in nature, contain profanity , off-topic or offensive. We reserve the right to revoke the posting privileges of any person who violates these rules at any time.

| | |
|--|---|
| From: archangel Mon 21 Jun 2010 07:39:32 AM EDT | How about all the residents negatively impacted by the frivolous lawsuit file another frivolous lawsuit against the non-residents, for lost potential wages and quality of life. |
| From: mdsha_d6 Mon 21 Jun 2010 09:17:44 AM EDT | If the developers were RESPONSIBLE and abided by their own environmental impact statement and just put in necessary controls and reasonable amount of density and impervious based on the zoning this project might be would be underway, Instead they choose to try to cheat and crap in more density... sad and pathetic. |
| From: archangel Mon 21 Jun 2010 10:40:38 AM EDT | MD, the developer did not do the EIS, the Army did. Now let's think about this for a minute, the Army wants the property off the books, how seriously do you think they took the EIS? Personally I don't care, just do SOMETHING. Lead, Follow or get the HELL out of the way. |

Copyright The Herald-Mail