

Maryland

County backs Army response to former Fort Ritchie lawsuit

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In an effort to wrap up the lawsuit that has stalled redevelopment at the former Fort Ritchie, the Washington County Commissioners agreed Tuesday to submit positive comments about a draft document prepared by the Army in response to the lawsuit.

The Army is accepting public comment through Sept. 19 on the document, a draft Record of Environmental Consideration (REC) that argues that no additional environmental review of the redevelopment project is needed.

The former fort at the [northeast](#) corner of Washington County has been transferred to the private development company Corporate Office Properties Trust, which planned a major development there including 1.7 million square feet of office space, 673 homes and apartments, and a hotel and conference center.

That project was put on hold in November when a federal judge ordered the Army to revisit its 1998 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project and issue either a supplemental EIS or a REC explaining why a supplemental EIS is not needed.

"I'm confident that the Army has done that thoroughly... and it's now just a matter of determining whether or not the community and the public comments support that or are opposed to that," William D. Hofmann, senior property and environmental [services](#) manager for COPT, told the commissioners Tuesday.

Hofmann said the comments on the document likely would determine how much longer the Army spends on the process before submitting a final document to the court.

The commissioners said they had been advised to stay out of legal proceedings surrounding the Fort Ritchie project and asked if it would be beneficial for them to send a letter supporting moving forward.

"I think we are at a point now when it would be very helpful to the redevelopment initiatives to rally around the continued development and the [due diligence](#) that has taken place through this point with the environmental assessment study as well as the updated (plan) COPT has provided," said Michael S. Zampelli, a member of the board of directors of PenMar Development Corp., the organization created by the state to oversee the transition of the fort to civilian uses.

Commissioner Kristin B. Aleshire said he thought a response in favor of moving forward was appropriate in light of COPT's environmentally conscious approach to redevelopment and the positive impact the project would have on the community.

"I've struggled to understand in my mind how the process could go to that degree of stoppage for a project that would clearly be beneficial to the public it would serve over time," Aleshire said.

"I think it's equally perplexing to us," Hofmann responded.

Hofmann said it was difficult to predict how long it would be before the stop-work order could be lifted.

“The end of the year would be optimistic,” he said.

On the Web:

The Record of Environmental Consideration and revised Fort Ritchie Master Plan are available at www.hqda.army.mil/acsimweb/brac/env_rec_review.htm