

Council overrides Leopold's BRAC project veto

By ERIN COX, Staff Writer

For the first time this term, the County Council last night defied an executive veto and endorsed a project to bring 1,600 homes, plus shops and offices, to western Anne Arundel County.

The unanimous vote overturned the veto of County Executive John R. Leopold, who said the project's developer was getting special treatment. In overruling Leopold, the council eliminated hurdles for the 250-acre Arundel Gateway project at the entrance of Fort George G. Meade. Arundel Gateway is one of several private projects aimed at accommodating the thousands of jobs arriving at the military post.

"The development and the pressure are being put on west county, and this is one of those projects that has to get going," said Council Chairman Ed Middlebrooks, R-Severn, who introduced the override measure. "This is the logical next step, and I don't think it could wait."

The military Base Realignment and Closure Process, known as BRAC, is expected to deliver as many as 14,000 defense industry jobs over the next few years, placing demands on county roads, schools and businesses as the new workers settle in the area. The Arundel Gateway project and others have been stalled awaiting the once-a-decade comprehensive rezoning process that changes how land can be used.

"Wasting another year is not what's in the best interest of this county," Middlebrooks said.

The council two weeks ago passed an amendment that circumvented the process for BRAC-related projects, then criticized Leopold for delaying comprehensive rezoning until next term.

Leopold, meanwhile, called the council's effort "spot zoning" and pointed out that the county Office of Law deemed the maneuver illegal.

"It would be inappropriate for the administration to approve this one project when I wouldn't approve anyone else who asked for spot zoning and there are 400 applications waiting for comprehensive rezoning," Leopold said, adding that he supports the Arundel Gateway development.

"One project, no matter how sound, should not get special treatment."

Controlled-growth and environmental advocates sided with Leopold on the issue, saying that Arundel Gateway should follow the same process as every other project.

When Leopold vetoed the project two weeks ago, developer Brian Gibbons said the county was already far behind on expanding roads and other services for new workers. His Arundel Gateway project is expected to generate \$60 million in fees for Anne Arundel, and he will build \$20 million worth of road improvements.

"We need it to move forward because we are woefully behind on infrastructure for BRAC," he said.

Gibbons said the Leopold administration has promised to help create a special taxing district to defray borrowing costs on the development.

Democratic county executive candidate Joanna Conti accused Leopold of playing politics with important projects.

"Leopold put the comprehensive zoning process and other zoning legislation on hold this spring to avoid having to make any controversial zoning decisions prior to the election," Conti said in a statement.

Councilman Jamie Benoit, D-Crownsville, represents the area and initially voted against the project. But last night, Benoit joined his colleagues in moving it forward. He declined

to comment after the vote.

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