

State buys Blackwater land

Agreement pleases environmentalists, developer

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ANNAPOLIS —A little river got a big win Wednesday with the help of some color-coded posters and smiling politicians.

The deal was already done before the state Board of Public Works sat down ostensibly to consider approval of an agreement to buy 728 acres for restoration and preservation along the Little Blackwater River, near Cambridge in Dorchester County.

After a lengthy presentation of aerial land posters complete with geometric land quadrants, Gov. Martin O'Malley let on that the deal had already been approved. In fact, press releases touting the approval had already been distributed.

"Is there anyone who wants to be heard before we approve them," O'Malley offered, while smiling and raising his eyebrows. "That's a hint you know."

The unanimous approval of the board —which consists of the governor, the state comptroller and the state treasurer —was the result of a much-praised compromise among environmentalists, state officials and a developer to protect one of Maryland's most treasured areas.

The land bordering the Little Blackwater River has been the subject of a heated debate that began last year when the developer, Duane Zentgraf, bought an area a few miles from the Blackwater Wildlife Refuge and proposed building a 2,700-unit resort complete with a golf course, hotel, retail and conference center.

Environmentalists were up-in-arms, complaining that the development would hurt the bordering river and farms as well as ruin prized wetland habitats.

The next two years brought a series of approvals and disapprovals by various boards and commissions, lawsuits both filed and threatened, and petition drives, rallies, press conferences and —perhaps most important —the 2006 political campaign.

Finally, an agreement was reached that gave the environmentalists the protections for Blackwater that they wanted, gave the developer compensation for the lost development as well as the right to build on some of the land, and calmed the nerves of local farmers who feared there would be drainage problems and curbs on hunting.

Thus, the state will spend \$10.3 million to buy about 70 percent of Zentgraf's land. The remaining 328 acres, furthest from the river, will be an "age-limited" community of up to 675 houses.

Zentgraf declined to comment but his attorney, William “Sandy” McAllister, said that he was happy with the compromise reached with the state.

“Great opportunities may be lost but alternatively great opportunities are available,” said McAllister. “Restoration is a good thing.”

The Blackwater Wildlife Refuge to the south of the recently purchased land is known for its extensive bird population, including great blue herons and bald eagles. It is also home to the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel known for its shy nature and chubby build.

Barbara Edgar, her husband and two sons own the Riverdale Farm, which borders the property. She says she was worried about the development because it would cause a “terrible drainage problem,” for local farms. Also she would not be able to lease her land for hunters of deer, geese and other waterfowl.

“I’m happy that it is not going to be a big development,” said Edgar. “It was the wrong development in the wrong place.”

She did express concern over the final plan and hoped that all the farms would not be adversely affected by restoration projects.

The Department of Natural Resources hopes to add to the area by improving drainage systems, re-planting forests, and using cover crops and farm buffers. They also hope to put an access point on the river for canoeing and kayaking.

“Our overriding goal is to improve water quality in the Little Blackwater River,” said Kevin Smith, chief of restoration services for the Department of Natural Resources.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation organized a petition that ultimately received more than 30,000 signatures against development of the area.

“It is a great day for the Bay and for the citizens of Maryland, too,” said Kim Coble, Chesapeake Bay Foundation’s Maryland executive director. “We all came together.”