

Tree Hill workshop begins

Planner of eastern Henrico development opens 8-day 'charrette' for public input

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Tuesday, November 14, 2006

The development of Tree Hill Farm will reshape eastern Henrico County, but the future of the historic property isn't clear even to the project's chief planner.

"I have no idea, myself," said Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, project director for planning the development of the 500-acre scenic gem along the James River.

Plater-Zyberk unveiled a new kind of planning process for the Richmond area last night with the opening of an eight-day public workshop, called a "charrette," that will help determine what kind of community will be built at Tree Hill.

About 300 people packed the ballroom at The Jefferson Hotel to get a first glimpse of -- and first say about -- what might happen to the land, which lies at the relatively unspoiled eastern gateway to Richmond.

There were no proposed development plans or watercolor renderings of what the property might become. There were no estimates of how many houses would be built, or how many square feet of retail stores and

offices could be developed, or what the road network might look like.

Instead, the developers say they're waiting to hear what the public wants. "We really come to these eight-day events without any specific ideas about the site," said Plater-Zyberk, a principal in the Miami-based firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk, or DPZ.

She and other members of the development team say they are focusing as much on what to preserve -- from the property's spectacular views of the river and the city skyline to the site of an Indian village in the farm's southwest corner -- as what to develop.

By next Monday night, county planners expect to have a clearer view of what the developer will propose for the property, which is under contract to Gray Land and Development Co. LLC.

Gray Land, the real estate arm of a company controlled by the family of former state Sen. Elmon T. Gray, expects to complete the purchase of the property early next

month. Company officials will not disclose the sale price.

Gray Land is a partner with local developer Steven A. Middleton, who said he initially had been approached by members of the Burlee family, which has owned the farm for almost 100 years. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Middleton, president of Commonwealth Properties.

The developers expect to file a rezoning application with Henrico by February, based on the results of this week's charrette -- derived from the French for "little cart."

The collaborative process is aimed as creating communities that look and work like old ones, with a blend of uses and housing types that are linked as much by sidewalks as roads.

"At the end of the day, we go home and the public has to live with the work we've done," said Michael D. Watkins, project manager and director of DPZ's office in Gaithersburg, Md. "We build places that people love."