

Daily Press

WHERE THE NEWSPAPER STANDS

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Editorial Page

Villages of Gloucester

Sometimes a very big development makes the most sense
What a difference some time makes. Time, and public input, and a
determination to negotiate an ending that is much better than the beginning.

What a difference three years, a considerable amount of public involvement
and *Gloucester* County staff have made in a mega-development. What began
as The Barrens is now The *Villages of Gloucester*: a proposal that is more
beneficial and more palatable to the county.

It is, by any reckoning, a biggie: 908 acres, more than 1,100 homes, a golf
course, retail and commercial clusters.

But it is better than the original concept, thanks to a new developer and some
concessions. The developer will pay for road improvements, build a water
tower, contribute land for a fire station, create a community park and a nature
preserve and give 10 lots to Habitat for Humanity. And it will contribute cash
toward the cost of facilities to serve its residents -- and other county residents.

There's another particularly welcome feature: The *Villages* will recycle storm
water from drainage ponds to irrigate the golf course and common areas. That
will cut the strain on the water supply and water treatment facilities, and
reduce the runoff that pollutes rivers, streams and the Chesapeake Bay. Other
localities should take note: That's exactly the kind of feature that's needed in
other developments.

The *Villages* will still have an impact on the county. You can't add a couple
of thousand residents and their children and cars and not have an impact. But
some *Gloucester* schools are already approaching capacity, and the financial
contribution of The *Villages* and its residents will help pay to add capacity.
All in all, county staff reckon, The *Villages* will contribute millions of dollars
a year to the county.

You'd hope that would be true in every development. You'd be wrong. A lot
of developments, particularly small ones or those with houses priced below

the median, end up costing more to serve than they add in tax revenue.

A rural heritage can be hacked away through a thousands cuts, or sliced through with a single, large cut. The look and feel of a once pastoral place can be transformed as much, or more, by hundreds of small developments as by one big development. And those small developments -- often "by-right" developments that are already permitted by zoning -- happen all the time, as *Gloucester* and lots of other counties know all too well.

Unified, large-scale developments offer several potential advantages. First, they are often so big that they require significant rezoning, and that opens the way for the county to negotiate proffers that are favorable to it and the other residents of the county. In the case of The *Villages*, the proffers include cash, land, public recreation amenities and road improvements. Ten 100-home developments, or 100 10-home clusters, would be unlikely to yield any of these advantages.

Second, larger developments attract developers with deeper pockets, and they may be more likely to agree to significant proffers in order to keep a project moving ahead.

Third, the county can apply a specialized tool, the planned unit development, or PUD, to achieve greater control over what can go where and win some public amenities in exchange for approval. That's what The *Villages* is asking *Gloucester* to do.

And fourth, by insisting that development be clustered, the county can end up with more open space for the public. The home count at The *Villages* is higher than the 675 the Comprehensive Plan calls for without the PUD, but the arrangement is superior. Having The *Villages*' 1,100 homes concentrated several to an acre and 400 acres, or nearly half the land, saved for recreation and open space is better than having 675 homes sprawled over 900 acres, which would leave all the land privately claimed with nothing for public use.

The county staff has recommended the project, a majority of the Planning Commission endorses it, and the Board of Supervisors would do well to approve it, after its hearing tonight. The *Villages* will change *Gloucester*; no doubt about that. But the argument could be made that, particularly in the southern part of the county, the tipping point in the transformation from rural to suburban has long been passed. This proposal won't so much cause radical change as move along a change already under way -- and do it with a neat, clean stroke with benefits for the entire county.