

Letter to the Editor

ALEXANDRIA SUPPRESSING ITS ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERT

We write on behalf of Beth El Hebrew Congregation. Many volunteer congregants (including this board member signing below) have spent countless hours in the mature forest behind Beth El (our "Chapel in the Woods") in an effort to create nature trails, remove invasive plants and plant native trees, shrubs and flowers. The change in habitat has been remarkable.

Last Fall, we learned of the plan to construct four homes, each over 5,000 square feet and several over 6,000 square feet on the 3.3 acres of forest adjacent to Beth El (Karig Estates, 3832-3834 Seminary Road). The plans also call for the 4th home to be built on a steep, forested slope composed at least partially of marine clay.

The Planning Commission has approved this plan despite vehement objection by most of the neighbors, particularly those whose homes are "down slope" from the proposed construction. Other experts employed by City do not approve the project and in fact have expressed concerns about the loss of approximately 50 trees, including some specimens over 100 years old. One of those experts, the City's Resource Manager, Rod Simmons, has advised Planning & Zoning that many of the largest and most valuable canopy trees are located on or near the slope which is set to be clear cut. In fact, much of the 3.3 acre forested property is to be clear cut. Those trees are filtering and cleansing the rain water and the roots are holding the soil in place and preventing the degradation of a steep, ancient slope on the property. The trees and habitat also host a variety of wildlife. At the base of this slope is a wetland, which as a City Resource Management Area requires a 50 foot protective zone. That wetland is the source of Strawberry Run, whose waters eventually flows in to the Chesapeake Bay. Although the City regulations allow a new sewer line to cut right through the wetland to service these 4 new mansions, there is no requirement that the sewer go there; and there are alternatives. Mr. Simmons has advised against the development as it is currently proposed.

The several acres of woods behind Beth El are contiguous with the forest on the Karig Estate. There are over a dozen migrating song birds in those woods every Spring. There are box turtles and other wildlife on the property. Clear cutting most of the 3.3 acres of forest adjacent to Beth El's forest will cause untold damage to what forest will remain and will likely destroy the functioning wetland.

This matter is back before the Planning Commission on Thursday November 9. Beth El has requested that Rod Simmons appear to offer his expertise as to why the Planning Commission should not approve the current plan. That request was made through the chair of the Planning Commission, Mary Lyman. Both Ms. Lyman and Mr. Simmons have advised that the City will not allow Mr. Simmons to testify at the Planning Commission hearing. This is unacceptable for many reasons.

1. It is wrong for the City's Planning and Zoning Department to prevent a balanced presentation at upcoming hearings;
2. The Planning Commission and City Council should not be prevented from hearing City experts whose testimony could militate in favor of moving that fourth house off the forested slope;
3. The City claims in multiple public pronouncements and advertisements that it is a "Go Green" City and further had made no secret of its image as a City which values native, mature trees, a disappearing commodity in Alexandria. Preventing Mr. Simmons from explaining the value of

preserving these trees and saving the wetland and the ancient slope is antithetical to the City's pronouncements.

Jeremy Flachs, Member of Board of Directors of Beth El Hebrew Congregation
