

Church Proposals Trouble Montgomery

Environmentalists Oppose Construction in County's Agricultural Reserve

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By TIM CRAIG

■ *Montgomery Post-Staff Writer*

Montgomery County Council member George L. Leventhal says he's getting a lot of calls from churchgoers who say they are praying for him.

Leventhal (D-At Large) and other council members find themselves in the middle of a political struggle between environmental groups and two churches over what devel-

opment, if any, should be allowed in the county's agricultural reserve.

Leaders of the churches, Bethel World Outreach Ministries and Seneca Creek Community, have mobilized members to lobby for proposals to build new complexes in the county's nationally recognized reserve. Environmentalists say they are mounting opposition because the projects would be the beginning of the end of efforts to keep the far northern and western edges of Montgomery

rural.

"To say no to a church is to say no to individuals and families, children and senior citizens," Bishop Darlington G. Johnson, presiding prelate of Bethel World Outreach Ministries, wrote to council members, who are scheduled to hold a hearing on the issue today.

Environmentalists, who have the backing

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CHURCHES, *From B1*

of some other faith groups in the county, are even more direct. "We do have an election coming up, and the Sierra Club makes endorsements before the election," said Anne Ambler, chair of the Montgomery County Group of the Sierra Club.

At issue before the council are efforts by the 2,500-member Bethel World Outreach church in Silver Spring, which has a largely black congregation, and 2,000-member Seneca Creek Community Church in Germantown to move to larger complexes in the agricultural reserve.

Leaders of both congregations say they have outgrown their locations. And with land scarce and real estate prices high, both turned to the agricultural reserve for a new home.

For 25 years, Montgomery officials have shielded the reserve — about one-third of the county's land — from most development. A vast swath of green

that runs across the northern and western edges of the county, it is home to more than 350 horticultural businesses and 500 farms that produce corn, soybeans, wheat and other crops.

Some churches have used an exemption in county zoning that gives "private institutional facilities," such as day-care centers and private schools, more flexibility to build on the reserve. But county leaders would have to approve the extension of water and sewer lines to new churches.

With eight of the nine council seats held by Democrats, and with environmentalists and the faith community viewed as vital Democratic constituencies, the council is on edge.

"If this is not handled in a fair, reasonable and balanced way, you have the real prospect of pitting the entire religious community against people who live in the ag reserve and environmentalists," said council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At

Large), a candidate for county executive. "It is probably the thorniest issue this council will have to deal with."

Silverman and former council member Isiah Leggett, his likely opponent for the Democratic nomination next year, say they favor finding a way to accommodate the churches' needs while protecting the reserve.

Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, who is campaigning for the Democratic nomination for governor, also has an interest in the debate.

On the campaign trail, Duncan boasts about the 98,000-acre reserve while noting that Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) has explored selling some state land. Duncan has also been mining black churches for votes.

Concerned about a slow erosion of the county's rural heritage, the council balked at the churches' requests earlier this year. Council members, with the consent of Duncan, formed a working group of local officials

to study the issue while they put the requests on hold.

The working group's findings, to be presented to the council today, will include calls to prohibit sewer hookups for private institutional facilities in the reserve. Those facilities could still install septic tanks, but the working group also recommends that no development in the reserve build on more than 15 percent of the land it owns.

Bruce Johnson, pastor of Seneca Creek Community Church, said recently that he envisions not just a sanctuary but also a day-care center, classrooms, soccer fields and an outdoor amphitheater for his church's new home.

Bethel World Outreach wants to build on 120 acres in the preserve.

Final council action on the proposed zoning changes is expected this fall.

"If it were not a church, I don't think we would have a problem saying no," Leventhal said.