The Gazette

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Committee delays vote on taxing districts

■ Trachtenberg proposes three amendments

BY JANEL DAVIS
STAFF WRITER

A decision on how to handle special taxing districts in the county will have to wait while a County Council committee continues to plod through information and questions associated with the much debated issue.

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Also hanging in the balance is a proposal by Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown that would abolish the Clarksburg Town Center Development District. The proposal has not been scheduled for council review or action.

Development districts were created to provide money for roads, parks, libraries and other amenities needed to support a community beyond what is normally required. Taxes are assessed on homeowners within the district to pay for those services.

The County Council approved, but has not implemented, the Clarksburg Town Center Development District. Two others, for Clarksburg Village and Arora Hills, have been postponed while the council reexamines how the taxing districts are implemented or whether to abolish them.

Over the past few years Clarksburg residents and developers have been at odds over the taxes.

The council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee continued discussion on the districts during a work session Tuesday.

Prior to the work session, committee chairwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda proposed three amendments designed to placate both sides.

The first amendment would require the Planning Board and the county executive to act on development district proposals within certain time limits. The second amendment would require that developers could only be reimbursed for improvements they otherwise would not have had to make. The third amendment, aimed at both developer and community concerns, would require notice of the taxing districts be placed in each house deed of future homebuyers.

"Before these amendments, it was an either-or situation," Trachtenberg said. "Either you were siding with the developers or the neighborhood groups. The [public] hearings proved that both sides had good points, and I'm looking to break the impasse."

The amendments build on a legislation Trachtenberg proposed last year, which would clarify the taxing district rules, increase disclosure requirements and outline which projects would be funded by the district taxes.

Residents of Clarksburg Town Center have argued that they were not properly notified about the development district and say that asking them to pay additional taxes of approximately $1,500 a year for a single-family home to finance roads and other public projects is unfair and illegal.

Developers have said adequate notice was given and that they are due reimbursements of about $5 million for road improvements already made.

A council staff report and county attorney opinion issued last year found that the county acted legally in creating the taxing districts. However, the staff report also found that the process used to create them was plagued with problems.

Last month, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) reduced the number of projects included in the Clarksburg development districts and recommended that residents in the three districts should be taxed $800 per year to pay for the projects.

The next committee meeting on development districts is scheduled for 9:30 a.m. March 10.