

Prince William board shift could open rural area

by Michael Neibauer

For the first time in 13 years, a window may be opening — albeit a narrow one — for developers to build in Prince William County's 80,000-acre preservation area, known as the Rural Crescent.

Peter Candland, the Republican nominee for Gainesville District supervisor, acknowledges his election Nov. 8 in the GOP-heavy district may be a game changer for Prince William development policy. He is seeking to replace Republican Supervisor John Stirrup, a vigorous supporter of the Rural Crescent who ran for state Senate but lost in the primary.

Candland's opponent is Democrat Ann Wheeler, who signed a pledge committing to oppose development in the Rural Crescent for at least the next four years.

As it stands today, the eight-member Board of County Supervisors is split between those willing to consider Rural Crescent-related comprehensive plan amendments and those generally opposed to them. A proposed amendment must be initiated by the board before it can even be reviewed by county staff; a 4-4 tie is the same as a "no."

If Candland wins, that would suggest five supervisors would at least be willing to listen to a proposal for development in the preservation area. The opportunity is unprecedented: Only one major Rural Crescent development proposal, Brookfield Homes' 180-acre Avendale along Vint Hill and Nokesville roads, has been approved in 13 years.

In the Rural Crescent, development is generally restricted to one home per 10 acres, with no connection to public sewer. Crescent preservationists say new developments belong in areas where the infrastructure already exists. As of Dec. 31, 2010, according to the county, there were 24,286 units of housing approved but not yet built in the development area.

Others say carefully designed development in the Crescent represents a natural extension of the county's growth — that by clustering homes in the preservation area, Prince William can shorten roads and utility lines, cut out drainage fields and preserve larger tracts of green space for public use.

The image of the Rural Crescent as rolling pastoral hills and grazing cows is part true, part falsehood. There are portions of the preserve where the one-home-per-10-acre rule stands, where horses run free and large estates loom over large tracts of land. But much of the area, say observers, is actually built out — developed on parcels subdivided long be-

fore the Rural Crescent was created.

"So much of the Rural Crescent is already developed in 1-acre lots," said Sherman Patrick, a land use planner with the Prince William law firm Compton & Duling LC. "There needs to be an honest assessment of what the Rural Crescent really is, so that we can balance the Comprehensive Plan. A Rural Crescent policy that forces people to live on 10-acre lots and mow 10 acres of grass doesn't make sense."

If there was a time to review the county's land use policies, Patrick said, "now would be the time to start doing it."

Candland said he supports the Rural Crescent.

"In the end, the underlying reason for creating it was, 'Hey, we grew too fast, we need to put in some sort of method to help limit growth as best we can,'" he said. "Now, is 10 acres some magical number? I don't know."

Citing his business background, Candland said it would be "unfair" not to hear both sides — rather than writing off one side out of hand. That's not to say he's gung-ho on development, but he is willing to listen.

Which may explain why Candland's top donors include the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association, William Peterson of The Peterson Cos., the Apartment and Office Building Association of Metropolitan Washington and National Capital Land & Development Inc.

"I'm a fair person," Candland said. "I definitely listen to all sides, but I do support the Rural Crescent."

Wheeler signed the pledge to oppose development in the preservation area, but the candidate said she is absolutely not anti-development — she believes strongly in bringing business to areas of the county that can handle it now, such as the Innovation tech park in Manassas or the Route 1 corridor.

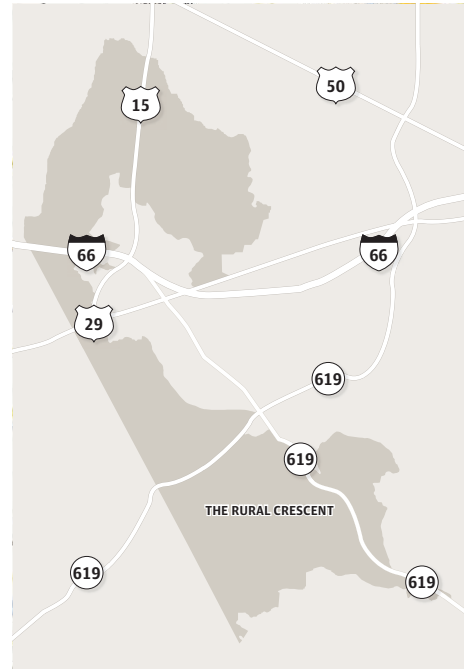
"We're not just talking about preserving open space," Wheeler said. "The Rural Crescent is tied at the moment to letting the infrastructure keep up. It's not just about keeping green space for green space. It's about schools and roads."

"I can't see where there's going to be a lot of reach to even try and develop in the Rural Crescent because there's so much build-out left in the county," Wheeler added.

Mark Granville-Smith, CEO of Classic Concept Builders Inc., filed a comprehensive plan amendment a couple of years back for a development in the Rural Crescent. He sought to build at a higher density for his 300-

A new frontier?

Prince William County supervisors have approved only one large-scale proposal in the 80,000-acre Rural Crescent preservation area since it was created.



acre tract near the intersection of Bristow and Dumfries roads — one home per 3 acres rather than one home per 10 acres — and offered to donate 170 acres for use as a county park and to tie into the public sewer system. That proposal died before the board on a 4-4 vote.

"It was never intended to be a permanent line," Granville-Smith said of the Crescent. "The intent was to concentrate development in the development area first, then development could expand outwards. What's happened since, during that period of time the growth rate had far exceeded the projected rate of the ultimate development area."

The Rural Crescent, Granville-Smith said, has been a "failure in terms of its intent to preserve rural space." Prince William allows developers to cluster homes in the preservation area, but builders still cannot connect to public sewer, Granville-Smith said, "and good drainage areas are few and far between."

The county government should look at this issue objectively, he said, and offer incentives for clustering and providing connections to public sewer, which will allow for greater preservation of large tracts of open land for public use.

"It's a very politically charged issue," Granville-Smith said, "for fear if you break the line, that's the end of the Rural Crescent."