

THE HISTORY OF AVENEL

The history of Avenel from farmland to its present day status as a luxury residential community has been cited by many as a textbook case of creative and responsible land use where there were not winners or losers, but where all parties involved gained in the process. To understand how groups as divergent as Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) the local water and sewer authority, two county governments, local equestrian groups, the Potomac community, the PGA Tour, and the developer of Avenel managed to work together to create the present day Avenel, it is necessary to understand the setting at the time the land was purchased by the developer in 1979.

At the time Potomac Investment Associates (PIA) was acquiring the 1,018 acre Avenel Farm in Potomac, Maryland for a luxury residential community, the WSSC was searching Montgomery County for a 500-acre site to acquire and hold for use as an advanced wastewater treatment plant (AWTP). As luck would have it, the WSSC settled on Avenel Farm as their choice for the AWTP and immediately began the process to condemn for public use over 500 acres of this choice, most expensive residential real estate in the county.

If the condemnation had proceeded, not only would the Avenel development of today never have existed in its present form, but the Montgomery County and Prince George's County ratepayers would have paid for one of the most expensive sites in the entire country for a sewage treatment plant (AWTP). As can be imagined, the local citizenry was very adverse to the idea of an AWTP in their community. The developer was equally concerned about having such a large tract of land carved out of the property. What would happen to all the unused land beyond the 50 acres actually needed for the AWTP. Would it sit as an inviting site for some future non-desirable public purpose use.

Avenel Farm, even though located only ten miles, as the crow flies, from the White House itself, was still being utilized for grazing cattle and boarding horses at the time of its acquisition by PIA. The barn on the site, dating from the 1940's and reportedly the largest single-story barn in Maryland, was once the focal point of the largest short-horned cattle farm in the state.

The Potomac area where Avenel is located has historically been a very equestrian locale where, not long ago, horses could be seen competing with cars for the right-of-way on the area's roads. The equestrian community did not want an AWTP facility, nor a residential community, replacing their valuable resource for boarding their horses, nor did they want to lose the miles of equestrian trails which crisscrossed the Avenel Farm connecting with other trails along the Potomac River and elsewhere in the community.

Another problem encountered in planning the development of Avenel Farm was that a 30-acre parcel of land had been carved out of the natural configuration of the site years before by the County for a future high school, which has since been declared surplus land and designated for a future (next-decade) park. While this carve out could be worked around, the symmetry of the overall development

called out for its inclusion in the planning.

About the time planning commenced for development of Avenel, PIA was contacted by Deane Beman, Commissioner of the PGA Tour, who had grown up in the immediate area and always thought Avenel Farm would make a great golf course with its rolling wooded hillsides bisected by the Rock Run Stream Valley. It was also about this time that Beman had come up with his "stadium" golf course concept. Spectator mounds and grassed amphitheaters make viewing golf, both for TV and on-site spectators, a much more enjoyable and rewarding experience than attempting to peer through children's periscopes over the shoulders of those in front, as it often done on traditionally designed golf courses of yesteryear.

Beman had initiated his "stadium" golf course concept at the Tournament Players Club at Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra, Florida and desired to have the PGA Tour create and own 25 of these courses around the country by the turn of the century. Inasmuch as the Kemper Open, which was being played annually at the adjoining Congressional Country Club, was looking for a new home, the first two pieces of an ever-enlarging puzzle slowly came together.

Perhaps there was an imaginative approach to planning the development of Avenel Farms that could satisfy the citizenry; allow the AWTP to be placed in the only logical, albeit expensive, spot in the County where it could be physically accommodated; allow the equestrians to continue to have their barn, fields, and trails, give the PGA Tour a new home in the County for the Kemper Open that could better accommodate the crowds, TV, and parking situation and thereby preserve this valuable economic resource for the County and its businesses; assimilate the surplus school site parcel into the community; create parks and opens space for everyone in the County to enjoy; and still permit the project to be a financial success.

But how does a developer go about getting local residents, the County government, the Park and Planning Department, equestrian interests, the PGA Tour, the WSSC, and nervous lending institutions to agree on anything, much less something as complex as 1,018 acres on which all parties appear to have divergent interests?

Perhaps the WSSC did not need to spend taxpayer's money on 500 acres of expensive real estate just outside Washington's Beltway. Perhaps less acreage could be utilized, if only for the plant itself and the buffer land could have other uses besides lying fallow and representing a continuing threat of government controlled use incompatible with the quality of residential development in the area.

The developer set about trying to negotiate and structure a master agreement to which all the divergent interests would be parties, and which would somehow satisfy all of these competing demands. What emerged is truly a textbook case study of innovation and creative land use planning. PIA did successfully get all pertinent parties to execute one document solving the land use issues. This document was called the Master Agreement, and it served as the guiding force throughout the development planning for Avenel, being finally executed in full in December of 1988.