

Nostalgia May Trump New Housing in Montgomery

By Marc Fisher

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In an era of \$4, \$5 or even \$8 gas, the imperative to live closer to work, use transit and walk to shops will grow with each spike in the price at the pump.

So when the owner of a 1930s garden-apartment complex that is next door to the Metro tracks and one block from downtown Silver Spring proposes to replace some cramped, outdated housing with a denser development, including nearly 300 moderately priced units, you might expect to hear hurrahs.

You'd be wrong. Rather than embrace the addition of much-needed housing to the new downtown that Montgomery County taxpayers have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to develop, the county planning board has taken the first step toward declaring the Falkland Chase apartments a historic property that could not be demolished. The board's final vote on the historic designation is set for next week.

What's historic about the 479-unit complex at 16th Street and East West Highway? Well, Eleanor Roosevelt cut the ribbon when the buildings opened in 1937. And Falkland Chase was one of the first apartment projects backed by the Federal Housing Administration.

Underwhelmed? Try this: When it was built, Falkland Chase provided moderately priced housing for civil servants and others of modest means.

Which happens to be exactly what Home Properties, which owns the apartments, intends to create if it can persuade the county to let it build on just one of the three parcels that make up the Falkland complex.

For a couple of years already, preservationists and residents have managed to stall the proposal to build 1,059 units in mid-rise buildings on the part of Falkland that sits north of East West Highway.

"People recoil in horror at the idea that Falkland might be demolished," says Mary Reardon, preservation chairman of the Silver Spring Historical Society. Adding a hundred or so units of affordable housing is "a pittance compared to losing nine acres of this wonderful community. We all support smart growth, but it was never intended to mow down everything near a transit hub," she says.

Reardon says many people still want to live in low-rise apartments, surrounded by green space, near a Metro station. No doubt she's right about that. But Donald Hague, a Silver Spring resident who is leading Home Properties' effort to redevelop the Falkland parcel,

says the apartments there are so small and so lacking in modern amenities that "it's mainly graduate students who move in these days. Families don't want to be there."

Remarkably, preservationists have rejected offers by the developer to have two-thirds of the complex declared historic while the northern piece, almost surrounded by tall office and apartment buildings, is taken down to add density.

From the way preservation advocates talk about the Falkland buildings, you'd think they were architectural masterpieces rather than garden-variety garden apartments. "Can you take a Michelangelo, rip off some of its corners and still retain its value?" Richard Longstreth, an architectural historian at George Washington University, asked the Planning Board at its last hearing on the issue.

There are some lovely old trees on the property, and the southern parcel is arranged in a gently inviting manner, but the portion of the complex that the owners want to bulldoze consists of basic brick apartments surrounded mainly by parking lots.

Residents tend to like the place. "It's lush, it's green -- it would be a crime to tear it down," says Jane Bergwin-Rand, who briefly lived in the complex in the 1970s and moved back in two years ago. "I have a little screened-in porch on the third floor and it's like having my own garden."

As sweet a spot as Falkland Chase may seem to some, change is inevitable. Maryland's proposed Purple line, envisioned to run from New Carrollton to Bethesda, would slice off a piece of Falkland, forcing at least two of its buildings to be torn down.

And the success of downtown Silver Spring's retail and office development means ever more people will want to live nearby. That's why a coalition of religious groups called Action in Montgomery negotiated a promise from the developer to set aside 282 units -- two-thirds of them in the proposed buildings and the rest at the company's other properties in the county -- for moderate-income families.

"The preservationists want to save Falkland as a monument to an old kind of affordable housing, but what we need is new affordable units," says Alisa Glassman, lead organizer of the group, which represents 32 congregations.

The developer, desperate to win the politicians' approval, has agreed not to oppose historic designation for the majority of the complex. But at some point, those garden apartments no longer make any economic sense. The county made its choice when it started redeveloping downtown Silver Spring. To cling to ordinary, 70-year-old brick apartments is an act of mere nostalgia.

"We all know we need the housing," Hague says. "If not here, where?"