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Proposal For Mine On Farm Resisted

S. Md. Town Seeks To Save Rural Feel

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The dump trucks speed along Port Tobacco Road, past the green Welcome sign, past the brick cottage post office, past the general store and past Torun Willits's modest white farmhouse. They carry gravel and sand from mines a few miles outside of town.

The trucks sound like the grumble of industry, leaving in their wake the dust of commerce -- some might call them signs of progress. But not in Welcome, a tiny Southern Maryland town of rolling hillsides, tall grass, mayflies and old barns nestled near the Potomac River. Here, folks speak of the gravel mines with passion.

"It's the end of Brigadoon. This will destroy Welcome as we know it," says resident Dennis A. Sullivan, who refers to the mines as "absolute cancers."

The Mill Run Horse Farm, a 212-acre property that operates as a standard farm, is at the center of a dispute over the continuing evolution of Southern Maryland's agricultural landscape into exurban Washington.

One of the region's most powerful developers, Facchina Construction Co., bought the farm in southwestern Charles County a few years ago and is petitioning to turn more than half of it into a mine to excavate dirt and gravel for the company's developments.

Mill Run is just over the wooden three-board fence from Willits's farmstead, where she raises thoroughbred horses. She fears Mill Run's sprawling meadow and big gray barn will become the "Grand Canyon in Welcome." And so, Willits, Sullivan and other townspeople, along with environmental activists, have formed a coalition to challenge Facchina's plan.

The proposal would add 200 trucks daily, back and forth, on the two-lane Port Tobacco Road, which neighbors claim already has its share of dump-truck traffic. Coalition members also believe that the operation could harm the town's water supply and endanger wildlife in and around Nanjemoy Creek.

Yet Paul Facchina Sr., chairman of the construction company, has a reputation as one of the state's most ardent conservationists. Facchina owns eight farms and lives on 600 acres of historic property with his family. The Maryland Environmental Trust counts him as one of four people in its history to permanently preserve more than 1,000 acres.

The county Board of Appeals is scheduled to hear Facchina's proposal July 25, and coalition members are furiously preparing their case. The county Board of Commissioners will make a final decision. With their reelection campaigns heating up, commissioners have stayed mum on the subject.

Residents are billing this as a David-and-Goliath struggle: the townsfolk of Welcome against Facchina, a man so influential in Southern Maryland's post-tobacco economy that some call him La Plata's Donald Trump.

For property owners near Mill Run, a lot is at stake. If the mine operation moves forward, property

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values could decline. Willits said experts have told her to expect a 30 percent decrease in hers.

"There went 30 percent of my retirement. You might as well work at Enron," said Willits, a software designer who moved to her 10-acre farm nine years ago.

Willits has thought about selling her property, but she said that as long as a mine is nearby, "I can forget about it because anybody can find a better spot than on top of a mine."

"We knew it was going to develop," she added. "Everything around here does. But we didn't know it was going to develop into an industrial blight zone."

Facchina said the coalition's worries are overblown. "What I'm doing is so minimal. It's beyond my comprehension that this thing could've developed into what it's developed into right now," he said.

Facchina pledged to operate on no more than 10 acres at a time. He said he plans to extract dirt and gravel only when he needs it to cover shortages at his residential, commercial and roadway construction projects in the county. Facchina said he expects there would be no operation at the site for weeks at a time.

"When I tell you this is a no-brainer, it absolutely is a no-brainer," he said. "You can't go to Home Depot and buy dirt. . . . So, in order to solve my contractual obligations on other contracts, I've got to just take the bull by the horns itself."

Activists challenging his proposal for Mill Run say the project could place Facchina's reputation on the line.

"He's known throughout the state of Maryland as a champion of land preservation, and it's well deserved," said Cheryl Thomas, one of the county's most outspoken environmental activists. "He is a champion of land preservation. And now he's doing just the opposite. This operation could possibly destroy this land forever."

If his proposal is approved, Facchina plans to restore the land and turn it into a corn and soybean farm after the mining operation is completed. Restoring gravel and sand mines in such cases has met with some success. In Anne Arundel County, Chaney Enterprises converted a mine into Renditions, a luxury golf course. Other mines in the state have been turned into lakes or filled to build developments.

"Frequently, interestingly enough, it gets converted to operations or uses that make the land far more valuable than it was when they first moved into it," said Charles E. Hawkins III, chief operating officer of the National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association.

Still, many neighbors in Welcome want none of it. Charles County, in its comprehensive plan released last year, made it a priority to retain the county's rural character and open spaces in the face of residential and commercial growth.

In Welcome, folks say they like their pastoral ways and intend to hold the county to its statement.

"You have a pretty peaceful life," Willits explained as her former racehorses, Lil and Lily, galloped around her in a grassy corral. "That's why you moved out to the country."

Sullivan, who lives a half-mile away and visited Willits's house on a recent balmy morning, chimed in: "Look around. It's lovely. It's rural. It's serene. . . . It's a small diamond, but I really believe that it's as nice a community as exists in this county."

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