

Developer Meeting with Community Early and Often in Attempt to Pitch 330-Home Bethesda Project

Toll Brothers and its public affairs firm met with neighbors over traffic, school overcrowding concerns

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- Before getting approvals from Montgomery County to build 330 homes on Bethesda's WMAL radio towers site, developer Toll Brothers is taking on a much tougher challenge: Getting support from the surrounding community.



The WMAL radio tower site in Bethesda is slated for up to 330 homes

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The developer hopes to put a mix of single-family homes, town homes and perhaps duplexes [on the 75-acre property](#) just north of the Capital Beltway spur and just west of I-270. It's pursuing an aggressive public relations campaign with neighboring residents already wary of traffic congestion

and overcrowded schools.

Tom Mateya, Toll Brothers' director of land development in Maryland, has conducted in-home visits with neighbors of the site. The company, with help from Rockville-based public relations firm Chesapeake Strategies, has set up meetings with local civic groups and given formal presentations, such as the one Mateya made Monday night to the Western Montgomery County Citizens Advisory Board.

Ellen Bogage, president and CEO of Chesapeake Strategies, said at the meeting Monday that Toll Brothers called asking for help the same day WMAL notified the developer it had submitted the winning bid for the property.

"We want to create a win-win situation," Bogage told members of the advisory board.

It appears unlikely everyone will get on board.

"We've been here 15 years and we love our house," Fernwood Road resident Karin Krchnak told Bethesda Beat, "but I raised the question with my husband of if we should consider moving."

Krchnak said a man representing Toll Brothers recently knocked on her door and asked her to sign a petition in support of the project.

Toll Brothers said it sent out representatives to collect emails of local residents so it could provide project updates and that it hasn't circulated any petition looking for support.

"I said, 'I'm 100 percent against this. Can I sign anything against this?' He walked away," Krchnak said. "I can't believe there's such a demand that we need this additional housing."

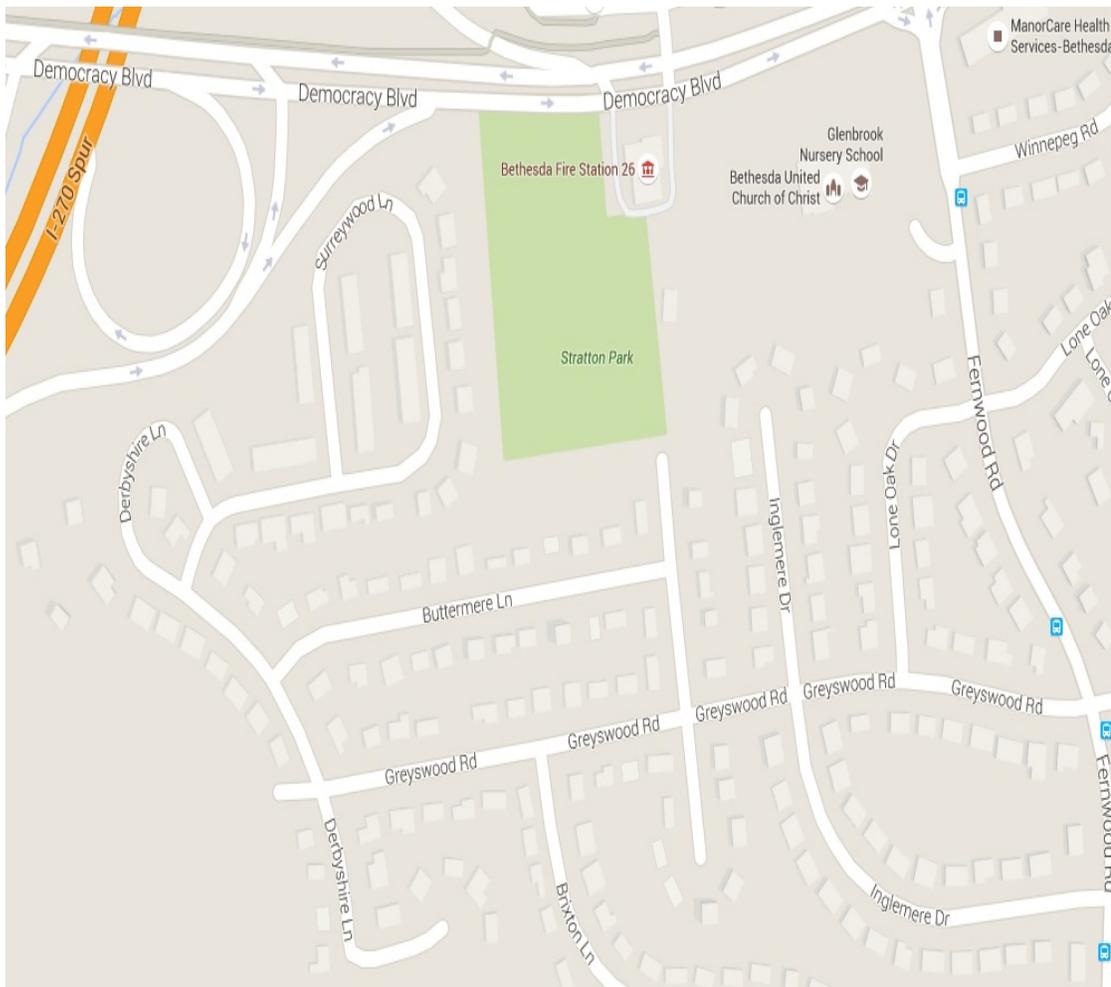
Like many neighbors of the radio towers site, Krchnak is

worried that traffic created by residents from the new homes will further clog up Fernwood Road, the two-lane road that connects with Democracy Boulevard and that's already prone to back-ups, especially during rush hour.

Residents who attended the advisory board meeting Monday expressed the same concern, claiming they'd be effectively trapped in their neighborhood unless major improvements were made to the area's streets.

One of the entrances to the yet-to-be-named Toll Brothers project would be on Greyswood Road, as prescribed in the area's master plan. Mateya said the developer is working with a consultant that is doing detailed traffic studies of surrounding intersections.

He said it's possible Toll Brothers will contribute to intersection improvements at Democracy Boulevard and Fernwood and said there are one or two other intersections that "look to need improvement."



The WMAL radio towers site (bottom left corner) and the intersection of Fernwood Road and Democracy Boulevard (top right corner), via Google Maps

Members of the West Fernwood Citizens Association, which was effectively relaunched this summer to focus on the Toll Brothers project, said Monday that Fernwood Road is their only way into and out of the neighborhood.

Shannon Ross, president of the West Fernwood group, said a neighborhood poll of residents found 95 percent said traffic was either their No. 1 or No. 2 concern.

“Obviously, a close second was schools,” Ross said.

Mateya said that based on the projection rates used by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), the project will add between 180 and 190 students once the community is

fully occupied.

Those students would be in the Walter Johnson High School cluster and head to Ashburton Elementary School, which at 918 students this year [is already 289 over its capacity](#) and has eight portable classrooms. An addition project is slated to open in 2020 to bring the school's capacity to 881 students.

"You have to wonder if they've done all the research, looking at Walter Johnson which is already overpopulated," said Janine Daub, who lives on nearby Shelton Street in the Wyngate neighborhood. "I think it's really unlikely that it would serve the current communities well, not to mention the incoming homes with young children."

Mateya also showed off four framework ideas for the project that were first unveiled at a community open house Saturday and that show large blocks of housing, new streets for the neighborhood and green areas for parks or fields.

Toll Brothers hasn't decided what those open areas might include and if the spaces will be open to the public or perhaps operated by a county government agency.

Construction on the project, which will include duplexes or town homes priced at \$900,000 and up and detached homes priced at \$1.1 million and up, could start in the summer or fall of 2017 if the county Planning Department approval process goes smoothly.

While it's likely some residents will fight the project, Toll Brothers' chances of approval should be increased by the fact that they aren't asking for new zoning. The property has long been zoned R-90, which allows exactly the type of development being proposed.

"I think it's going to happen no matter what," Daub said. "You'll never please all the people, but maybe there can be

something they can put in that would appeal to families as well, like a park. Those of us who live in the area might benefit.”