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FEATURED

TOP STORY

Bryans Road tenants hinted at town hall

By Paul Lagasse plagasse@somdnews.com 10 hrs ago



Above left, Commissioner Thomasina Coates (D) speaks during her first town hall meeting Thursday evening at the Bryans Volunteer Fire Department. Above right, Charles County Department of Economic Development director Darrell Brown make point during Thursday's town hall meeting hosted by Commissioner Thomasina Coates (D) in Bryans Road.

STAFF PHOTOS BY PAUL LAGASSE

Western Charles County residents were given good news about their area's economic prospects during a town hall meeting Thursday night hosted by Commissioner Thomasina Coates (D).

County redevelopment director Taylor Yewell revealed that the owner of the Bryans Road Shopping Center is engaged in “serious negotiations” with a potential tenant for the former Safeway storefront, which became vacant last April following a surprise announcement by Albertsons Companies LLC, which acquired the Safeway chain several years ago.

Yewell said that the county did not know who the potential tenant was, although the space is still equipped as a grocery store.

S2 Bryans Road Associates LLC, which owns and manages the shopping center, has been struggling to keep existing tenants in the venue and to attract new ones. Last October, the immediate past board of county commissioners approved zoning changes proposed by S2 to allow the construction of self-storage units there, which S2 had argued was necessary to keep the retail hub in business.

In January, the College of Southern Maryland’s board of trustees voted not to pursue a proposal by S2 managing member George Stewart to open a culinary training institute in the former Safeway space. A month later, the shopping center experienced another setback when the Pizza Hut suddenly closed without warning.

S2 has had success attracting new tenants to the shopping center, however. A branch office of the Charles County Sheriff’s Office opened in November, and a SuperScholars Enrichment Program facility opened earlier this year. S2 has also signed a letter of intent with Marie’s Diner, a staple of La Plata’s restaurant scene, to open a second location in a 5,000-square-foot space.

Previously, Stewart has said that S2 was in discussions with a southern cuisine and seafood restaurant, an “international grocer,” a soft-goods retailer that operates 400 stores nationwide and an entertainment-themed group.

“I think in the near future you can see a mix of retail and non-retail uses,” Yewell said. “So keep your fingers crossed.”

County economic development director Darrell Brown praised Stewart’s efforts to bring new tenants to the shopping center, calling him a “good corporate citizen.”

“George Stewart is a very savvy developer,” Brown said. “There isn’t much we can tell him that he doesn’t already know.”

“Your commissioners, your delegation, your Department of Economic Development, we’re engaged, we’re not ignoring the situation with regard to the Bryans Road Shopping Center,” Brown emphasized. “It is a priority for the department, it is a priority for the commissioners.”

Yewell said that the new owners of the Maryland Airport, Potomac, Md.-based PSM Holdings LLC, which acquired the airport in February, have plans to expand the runway to serve larger aircraft in a bid to lure travelers looking for easier access to National Harbor in Prince George’s County.

Yewell noted that one of PSM’s principals was “heavily involved” with the establishment of the waterfront project along the Potomac River overlooking the Woodrow Wilson Bridge.

“I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but Maryland Airport is the closest reliever airport outside the no-fly zone for Washington, D.C.,” Yewell said.

A reliever airport provides additional capacity when nearby large commercial airports become saturated. A longer runway would allow Maryland Airport to handle business aircraft in addition to the other private planes that currently operate from there.

The county’s planning department is also in the process of preparing a proposal to rezone 600 acres of land surrounding the Maryland Airport for commercial use, which would allow expansion of activities at the airport.

Brown also highlighted recent economic development progress in nearby Indian Head, particularly the beginning of construction of the Velocity Center on the site of the old Ely’s Warehouse. The training facility is a joint project of the Town of Indian Head partnered, the Charles County Government, CSM and the Charles County Chamber of Commerce’s Military Alliance Council.

“It’s taken a long time, but it’s also taking a lot of people involved in this,” Brown said. “It’s a testament to collaboration.”

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When completed, the center will feature a lab that can be used by CSM students and robotics clubs as well as a space for Naval Support Facility Indian Head personnel to conduct research and security operations. The facility will also include space that can be rented by local organizations and businesses.

Brown said that the Velocity Center is expected to act as a magnet to attract other technology businesses to Indian Head to work with the base on military and technology transfer projects.

“When you have that economic synergy ... then that activity spurs other activity, ideally bringing other businesses into the town,” Brown explained.

Coates’ first town hall as District 2 commissioner also featured updates on the county’s rural broadband initiative, drug take-back program and supplemental nutritional programs for adults and children.

Sen. Arthur Ellis (D-Charles) and Del. Debra Davis (D-Charles) — who was Coates’ predecessor as District 2 commissioner — also attended the event. Ellis spoke briefly about his efforts to persuade Gov. Larry Hogan (R) to provide additional funding for the state’s designated economic opportunity zones, which are part of a federal program that offers tax incentives to private investors to encourage them to develop in economically distressed areas.

Ellis also responded to residents’ concerns about the perceived lack of accountability of the Charles County Board of Education to the county’s other elected political leaders, a reference to the debate over the controversial Fresh Start Academy pilot project for violently disruptive students in pre-kindergarten through second grade.

Coates said that the current board of county commissioners has reiterated to the board that it views its role as primarily one of budget review and approval, and that with regard to education policy, “We’re staying in our lane.”

“As senator, my committee is education, health and environment,” Ellis replied. “So this is my lane.”

“So he’s going to solve all your problems,” Davis joked.

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