

Developer stays out of public debate Halle's effort to open rubble landfill could be decided tomorrow; He keeps a low profile; He attends, but doesn't speak at, planning hearings

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West County developer Warren E. Halle wants things his way, even if that means waiting out lengthy court battles.

The developer of Seven Oaks and owner of a significant chunk of Odenton's town center has been locked in legal disputes for nearly a decade over a rubble landfill he wants to open in a more rural part of Odenton.

The latest round in the dispute has dozens of West County residents packing County Council meetings to oppose the landfill proposal and council members proclaiming their legislative prerogative as they seemingly disobey a judge's order to include the proposal in the county's long-term solid waste plan.

Meanwhile, Halle has been content to observe the proceedings silently from the rear of council chambers, counting on Maryland's second highest court to settle the matter.

The lengthy court battle and Halles' reticence in public are a familiar pattern for the businessman who spearheaded one of the largest residential developments in the county and whose projects here span the administrations of three county executives.

Though Halle and his projects have been a fixture in the county since at least the 1980s, few community leaders, fellow developers or elected officials know him personally.

He did not respond to repeated requests for an interview for this article made through his attorney, Steven P. Resnick, and did not return a call to his headquarters in Silver Spring. Neither Halle nor Resnick respond to questions submitted in writing.

The Potomac resident has attended County Council meetings and hearings at which his proposed landfill is at issue, but he steadfastly refuses to speak. Resnick said he has advised his client not to talk to reporters.

"He shows up at meetings, but he doesn't really interact," said Glenn Akers, president of the Greater Odenton Improvement Association (GOIA). Akers, like many active in West County, has dealt mostly with Halle's associate, Stephen N. Fleischman, vice president of Halle Cos. and the company representative on the Odenton Town Plan committee.

Landfill troubles

Councilman Bert L. Rice, whose district includes the landfill site and Seven Oaks, said he had "a cordial and nice" meeting with Halle over coffee at Rick's Cafe in Odenton in 1995, but he still doesn't think he knows the developer personally.

"Any dealings I've had with him were usually through lawyers," said Rice, referring to court disputes several years ago between West County civic associations and Halle over the landfill.

Rice, a rubble fill opponent in his days with GOIA, last month sponsored the amendment to remove the rubble fill proposal from the Solid Waste Master Plan. The landfill cannot get a permit from the Maryland Department of the Environment if it is not included in the county's plan.

The council is expected to vote tomorrow on that plan. Despite his low profile, many in the community have an opinion of Halle, and, friend or foe, most people refer to him by his nickname, "Cookie."

Reputation for tenacity

"The boy doesn't give up, I will say that," said former business partner and fellow developer W. Calvin Gray Jr.

Gray of Severna Park last worked with Halle to develop a subdivision called Aisquith Farm off Riva Road, south of Annapolis. Halle ended up in court over the deal when Gray and Ernest J. Litty Jr. sued Halle, claiming he reneged on an agreement to pay them \$1.2 million to buy them out of the project. Halle disputed the claim to the Court of Special Appeals, but lost in 1995 and paid Gray and Litty.

A gracious winner, Gray followed the advice of his mother: If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.

"I've got to give him an A for tenacity," Gray said with a chuckle during a phone interview recently. "He's a hard-charging guy and wants to try to make things happen."

Gray met Halle in the 1970s in Ocean City, where both families had vacation homes. Halle, 57, lives with his wife, Martha, 58, in Potomac in Montgomery County.

Legal dealings

In 1984 and 1985, the Halles paid \$29 million for 1,100 acres in Fairfax County, Va., which would become Kingstowne, a development with 6,000 homes planned. Later, in the midst of construction there, the Halles ended up in U.S. Tax Court in a dispute over a payment in the original purchase, which they wanted to deduct as interest on debt. The Halles won the right to deduct \$900,000 as interest in 1996 after appealing the case to the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va., according to court documents.

Almost at the same time that the Kingstowne development moved forward, Halle began Seven Oaks off Route 175 in Odenton. But soon that project, too, landed Halle in a dispute when the county claimed the developer owed more than \$420,000 in water- and sewer-connection fees and school-construction fees for the planned 4,700-home community.

Former County Executive Robert R. Neall remembers trying to renegotiate an agreement for payment of the fees in 1992 after an initial agreement with the administration of the previous county executive, O. James Lighthizer, went bad. When Lighthizer in the late 1980s scrapped a plan to expand a wastewater treatment plant that would have allowed West County developers to build more homes, Halle balked at paying the water, sewer and school fees.

In meetings with Halle in 1992, Neall found him "relaxed in espousing his views" but "intent on getting his way."

Robert J. Dvorak, director of planning and code enforcement under Neall, remembers Halle as a hard-driving businessman with "cash-flow problems" as he and the county tried to work out a payment plan for the fees.

"He would come in and drive a really hard bargain," recalls Dvorak. "I don't begrudge him that."

Others simply don't want to discuss Halle or his tactics.

Katharina DeHaas, who has repeatedly mobilized Odenton residents in opposition to the landfill, would not discuss the developer while his suit over the landfill is in court. And longtime Odenton resident Sally Shoemaker also declined to talk.

Shoemaker narrowly lost a bid in 1991 to be president of the Odenton Improvement Association when residents of Seven Oaks and Halle employees from outside the county filled the election-night meeting, according to the GOIA's Akers.

"Just let sleeping dogs lie," Shoemaker said recently, refusing to discuss the 6-year-old incident.

At the time, Shoemaker and other Odenton residents saw it as an attempt by Halle to control the local organization, which had riled the developer with restrictions on how town center property, including Halle's, should be developed.

But Bill Chewning, who owns several North Odenton business properties, said the election effort was pushed by local business people, not just Halle, who wanted to get enough votes to change the face of the organization. It worked that night, but Chewning's wife, Mary Chewning, stepped down from her position as president within weeks of the controversial election because "it was a bad scene," Bill Chewning said recently.

Chewning, who owns properties that border Seven Oaks on Route 175, said Halle is no more determined than any builder or developer has to be.

"You read a lot of things in the newspapers, but from the contact I've had with him, he seems like a very nice gentleman who knew what he was doing," Chewning said. "Most people that are builders or developers have their own outlook on how they would like their properties to be used which is the reason they are in business."

Supporters back his efforts

Some Seven Oaks residents fear that Halle's relationship with the county could be hurting progress in their community, but they blame county bureaucracy, not Halle, for the delays.

Scott M. Neil, a member of the Seven Oaks Community Association, points to Blue Water and Town Center boulevards, unfinished thoroughfares in his community.

Halle wants to put the final coat of blacktop on the roads, where drivers now dodge potholes and jutting manhole covers, Neil said. But the county Department of Public Works ordered Halle in July to rip up the two roads and rebuild them to an "approved road profile," according to a letter to Halle from the chief of the inspection division.

"It's absolutely frustrating," Neil said of the delay in fixing the roads. "The county's red tape is dragging."

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