Notes for Lead and First Story

The cast:

John Thoburn, owner of a golf driving range in Reston, Virginia.

Ron Christian, a Lutheran minister and representative of Fellowship Square Foundation, a Lutheran organization based in Herndon, Virginia, which builds and maintains affordable housing for senior citizens. Fellowship Square currently has three apartment complexes in Reston with a total of 464 apartment units. Those three complexes are not located near Equestrian Park.

Robert B. Woodward, resident of the Equestrian Park subdivision.

Jack Mansfield, another resident of the Equestrian Park subdivision who is described by many as a neighborhood activist.

Background:

Thoburn owns a golf driving range which is located next to an exclusive neighborhood, Equestrian Park, in the upscale community of Reston, Va. Reston is about 25 miles west of Washington, D.C., and many of its residents hold upper level government or private industry jobs – they’re not rich but they are quite comfortable, some could even be called wealthy. The homes in Equestrian Park are on two-acre parcels and some are valued at more than $1 million.

The 46-acre Thoburn parcel, with the golf driving range, is located at the intersection of Hunter Mill Road and the Dulles Toll Road. The Dulles Toll Road is a 12-lane (six in each direction) highway that provides access between Washington, D.C., and Dulles International Airport. The Toll Road is also used by commuters en route to Washington, D.C.

For the past five years Thoburn’s operation has been a thorn in the side of Equestrian Park residents. Four years ago the county (Fairfax County, Virginia) ordered Thoburn to fix some alleged landscaping violations at the “Golf Park.” Part of the fix was to plant additional trees to screen the golf driving range from its neighbors. Thoburn refused and, as a result, spent 97 days in Fairfax County Jail. That made him something of a celebrity, even earning him a jailhouse interview on “The CBS Evening News.” It also made him a hero of the property rights movement. In his Evening News segment, Thoburn compared himself to Nelson Mandela and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Thoburn was freed from jail last May and the court authorized the county to plant the extra trees and then bill Thoburn for the work. The county planted the trees. Thoburn has, so far, refused to pay the $32,000 bill for the tree planting and the dispute continues.
Thoburn’s proposal:
Thoburn, who has formed a partnership with Christian and his group for this project, has proposed donating a portion of the land (5 acres) now occupied by the Golf Park to the Lutheran housing group so that they can build 48 apartments for the elderly and the disabled. Thoburn is even willing to build additional affordable housing units at his own cost. However, all this is contingent on the rest of his plan. Thoburn wants the county to allow him to build offices, stores and homes on the rest of the 46-acre parcel. Thoburn and Christian are currently asking Fairfax County for high-density zoning for the project.

The quotes and arguments:
Thoburn: “I believe in good stewardship of the Earth’s resources, and I believe it would be a waste to build more housing for millionaires here. These people think they live in Middleburg, but they’re not.” (Middleburg is a rural community in nearby Loudoun County, Virginia, that is home to many extremely wealthy people and very expensive estates and homes.)

Arguing that the property is served by the public transportation system (buses) and is next to the Dulles Toll Road, Thoburn says, “It’s an ideal location for high-density affordable housing.”

Thoburn said during the landscaping dispute that landed him in jail, that it is unreasonable to put tight restrictions on property development next to a highway interchange and that the “semi rural” character that neighbors cherish is just a mask for snobbery. He continues to make that argument during the current dispute.

“This is the new segregation, socioeconomic segregation. These people only want to build $2 million homes around them.”

Christian: Could not be reached for comment.

Woodward: “We don’t believe that John Thoburn is a credible crusader for affordable housing. In the past, he has aligned with a number of different groups to, frankly, look legitimate. He’s looking to stick in the higher-density housing to set a precedent.”

Woodward has proposed strengthening the county’s land-use plan to protect the low-density character of the area.

Mansfield: “A large planned community like Reston has to have a definite border. If not, you’ll have string of office buildings from Reston to Tyson’s Corner.” (Tyson’s Corner is about 10 miles east of Reston on Virginia Route 7. The area between the two communities has historically been a semi-rural and suburban area but in recent years many large office complexes have been built adjacent to the highway.)

Where it’s going:
There have been several citizen task force meetings on Thoburn’s proposal in recent weeks and so far the neighbors’ side has prevailed. The final decision will be made in March by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors. There is no indication at this time of how the supervisors feel about this matter.