

Bluff Point is more than a place

Bluff Point is a place and an idea. We know the place. Turn off VA Rte. 200 at the Calvary Baptist Church and follow Rte. 608 (Bluff Point Road) past Lynhams; bear left on Jarvis Point Road, then right on Monarch Shores Drive, and keep going until you bump into the broad salt marsh where Barnes Creek empties into the Chesapeake Bay.

From Lynhams to the end of the road, the land is flat and falls off to the east and south. It's not particularly attractive land, mostly second- or third-growth woodland--loblolly pine and gum rooted in a layer of organic topsoil that lies atop variegated orange sand; but it's home to a remarkable variety of mammals, reptiles, migratory and resident birds, and insects. A combination of shallow depressions and high water table has created many acres of freshwater wetlands, furnishing bountiful habitat for the wildlife of the region.

Along the water's edge of Barnes Creek and Chesapeake Bay, tidal wetlands, rich in cordgrass and nutrients, provide food and shelter for commercial and game fishes, shrimps, crabs, shellfish, and wading birds, to mention only a few of the species. Wetlands help to stabilize the shoreline and absorb the energy of storm surges. They soften the margin between land and water.

Bluff Point is not wilderness; it's not even what one would call rough country. Small farms frame the large splotch of woodland and modest homes are scattered along the bordering roadways. But the human touch is light. There's little sign of the nervous commotion that defines contemporary urban life.

Bluff Point is an idea. It is a symbol of an era rapidly passing, a simpler and less frenetic era under assault by modernity. It is full of naturalness and has retained a freedom from control. As the noted conservationist Arthur Carhart once wrote, such places have not been "skinned, scraped, dug up, regimented and pounded into shapes and services desired and demanded by 'civilized' man." Bluff Point is a rather higgledy-piggledy place. The residents like it this way.

Now, a wealthy developer wants to tidy it up. He plans to clear forest, fill wetlands, widen and pave roads, and throw up more than 500 residences, a hotel with 90 rooms, and marina. He is going to divert surface drainage, build hard shoreline structures, and dredge stream bottoms. He is going to lay out straight property lines and neat rectangular lots, eradicating the graceful curves of nature. Backyard cookouts will replace turkey clutches. Vehicle noise and exhaust fumes will displace bird songs and salt breezes.

As the members of the Board of Supervisors of Northumberland County fuss over traffic counts, "by-right" development criteria, estimates of future retail sales, and something the County's consultant calls "marginal costing estimates," I am left to ponder more fundamental questions: What will become of Northumberland County? Will we forsake a proud heritage in order to look like Kent Island, Maryland? In whose interest are our public officials acting?

It has been a dreary affair. I'm reminded of a remark by that great cynic of the Renaissance Niccolo Machiavelli, "One who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived."

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