

Millersville space designated for Coppermine tennis center likely to be used for other recreational sports now

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After the Anne Arundel County Council voted down the development of a tennis center with Coppermine Racquet and Fitness in Millersville during its last meeting, plans for the neighborhood's space may include lit multipurpose fields.

“If we were to build fields they would certainly be multipurpose fields that would be used for as many sports as we could utilize them for — that would include things like football, soccer, lacrosse, field hockey — to maximize the use of the fields by recreational programs,” said Anne Arundel County Recreation and Parks Director Jessica Leys.

The community is particularly in need of fields with lighting so residents can continue to play even through the fall and winter months as it gets dark earlier.

But, especially after the council's vote Oct. 18, any progress on developing the Millersville space will require a lot more planning.

The Coppermine Tennis Center project would have been a partnership between the county and Coppermine Racquet and Fitness that availed residents of both indoor and outdoor tennis courts. Coppermine would have designed, built and leased the property from the county, which the legislation's fiscal note estimated would add \$2.6 million in revenue to the county over 25 years.

“The funding is already approved, so we could build fields as soon as next fiscal year,” Leys said. “I don't know whether we can get it together that quickly.”

The department's primary goal with the 33 acres at 1580 Millersville Road is to repurpose as much of the designs, planning and money from the tennis center project as possible to expedite the process of making the space available for local athletes. Leys said she hopes the only major changes to the project will be the scope and the title.

"I'd like to stay true to the original project which would start construction in FY24. If we could reprogram the use of the property and still have construction in the next couple fiscal years, I would consider that a success. I'd like to stay with the schedule," she said.

County Executive Steuart Pittman, a longtime champion of the tennis center, shared the department's concerns about how much time and money had already been put into plans for the center.

The project cost \$2.5 million to develop. Though, \$1.7 million was spent to acquire the Millersville site, about \$800,000 was spent on designing the tennis center for that space. That design money likely cannot be recouped, Leys said.

"It was the fiscally responsible thing to do to move forward given the amount of money the county had put into this. This was a project that was in the County Council's annual budget," Pittman said. "This will set us back, but we will regroup. We'll make a plan for this site. We'll make a plan for tennis." That plan for tennis is still pretty amorphous.

"We will be looking at our other park sites, especially underutilized sites within the county and other park properties that can have tennis as an amenity, specifically indoor tennis," Leys said, noting that it may not be as large as the Millersville proposal. "When you do planning and designing, it's usually very specific to the landscape and to the property, so picking up those eight tennis courts and putting them somewhere else isn't necessarily very easy to do. But, we would likely work with the same engineers to see how much of the old design and engineering work we could use on a new location."

For tennis teachers in the community, the vote against the Coppermine Tennis Center means many of their students will continue to struggle to find courts to play on during the colder months.

“Every year we come to the end of the outdoor season and our parents and students ask us the same question: ‘Can we get to more tennis?’ ‘We’re excited, my child wants to keep it up.’ ‘What can we do this winter?’ The best we can do is refer them to Bowie, to refer them to private facilities or tell them to try to squeeze into the Navy Brigade Sports Center when the varsity team isn’t using the building,” said Annapolis Area Tennis School President Douglas Lamartin during public comment at the County Council meeting on Oct. 18.

Others said not having indoor courts put local tennis teams at a disadvantage when they play against other schools. Some also advocated for the center saying the sport is something people of all ages can play and it’s a sport that allows for social distancing as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread throughout the county and the country.

Meanwhile, those opposed cited concerns over noise, traffic and expenses. Others didn’t want to see the county partnering with a for-profit entity like Coppermine, saying it would limit who could play based on socio-economic status and put Coppermine at an unfair advantage to profit in the county.

Ultimately, the vote split the council 4-3. Nathan Volke, R-Pasadena, Andrew Pruski, D-Gambrills, Amanda Fiedler, R-Arnold, and Jessica Haire, R-Edgewater voted against the center, while Sarah Lacey, D-Jessup, Allison Pickard, D-Glen Burnie, Lisa Brannigan Rodvien, D-Annapolis, voted in favor of it.

During public comment at the meeting, Millersville residents voiced concerns over preserving the quaint, residential atmosphere of their neighborhood. “This is not about tennis,” said Neighbors of Millersville Park Community Association representative Scott Blackketter. “I don’t think anyone in opposition of this bill is against tennis or even a big tennis facility. This is about appropriate use of land and protecting our communities, the communities we invested our life savings into buying into.”

As for what's immediately next for the Millersville property, the Recreation and Parks Department has taken into consideration the concerns about traffic from the site and will be conducting a traffic analysis before they decide how to move forward.

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