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Upper Marlboro residents debate historic nomination

Debate breaks out over town's proposal to nominate area for national register

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by Zoe Tillman | Staff Writer

A proposal to nominate a residential section of the town of Upper Marlboro for a spot in the National Register of Historic Places sparked debate during Tuesday's monthly town meeting among residents for and against the idea.

The proposed nomination was presented to residents at the Sept. 14 town meeting and would nominate a 99-acre section of the town to the west of the downtown area for a spot in the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places.

Former town commissioner George Leonnig pushed the three-person Board of Commissioners to explain why a listing was necessary and said he did not buy Board President Stephen Sonnett's argument that it would inspire residents to care for their homes and contribute to town pride.

Leonnig also questioned why only part of the town was included in the nomination and whether the commissioners were sure a listing would not impose restrictions on residents in the future.

"I haven't heard what the benefits are going to be," Leonnig said during the meeting.

According to Howard Berger, acting supervisor of the historic preservation section of the Prince George's County Planning Department, listing in the register does not place any restrictions on property owners. Berger worked with a private consulting group to prepare the nomination at the town's request.

Resident Ellen Storey challenged Leonnig during the meeting, saying that a spot in the register would make her feel proud of the town.

"I don't see anything wrong with 'feel-good,'" she said.

Sonnett and the two other board members, Joseph Hourcle and James Storey, did not set a date for a vote on whether to approve the proposed nomination. If approved, the nomination would be submitted for a series of required approvals from the county, state and National Park Service.

Ten residents attended the monthly meeting, which also featured discussion about planning for events to celebrate the upcoming 200th anniversary of the War of 1812; the town was established

in 1706 and was home to several historic figures who played a role in the War of 1812. Sonnett said the town is seeking volunteers for an event-planning committee.

"It's about time we let our star shine a little bit," he said.

James Storey, who serves as the board's treasurer, also noted in his report during the meeting that a preliminary audit of the town's budget for fiscal 2010, which ended in June, showed a \$174,000 surplus. The official audit results are expected to be released by the end of October.

The town ended fiscal 2009 with a surplus of more than \$200,000, a feat Sonnett has attributed to conservative budgeting and limited capital project spending.

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