

# Drum Point tax district changing

■ Fees to increase; meets minor resistance at forum

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A draft of Drum Point Property Owners Association's new special tax district budget received little opposition at the first of two public forums on Saturday, though a handful of homeowners spoke out against an increase in annual fees paid per lot.

Drum Point is one of two communities in Calvert County to operate as an STD, which must be ultimately approved by the Board of County Commissioners and which collects fees from property owners to enable the association to maintain sufficient funds that are put toward maintaining the community's infrastructure. Since 1996, the STD at Drum Point has gone toward road repairs, right of way maintenance, storm damage, snow removal, road sign maintenance and other projects.

The draft presented on Saturday, which also can be found on [www.dppoa.org](http://www.dppoa.org), is for the fiscal 2013-2014 STD budget. Unlike previous STD budgets, which were valid for five years, this one will only be valid for two, DPPOA President Gary Heal said.

"We know this isn't enough money," he said. "If we go more than two years, we'll just be in the hole again."

Heal said the first two approved STDs requested \$162 per lot per year, the next asked for \$192 and the most recent asked for only \$50 per lot per year at the request of the BOCC following pressure from residents who felt the fees were excessive. But because of that, Heal said, "We spent more than we took in." Now, in order to continue making necessary improvements to infrastructure, the fees must be raised to \$166.

"We still have the same amount of roads," 15.3 miles requiring maintenance, Heal added, "but we have more traffic and more construction."

Total STD expenses for 2013 and '14 are \$261,266 each year, with \$56,155 going toward operations and maintenance

and \$56,337 for administrative expenses each year; the remainder goes toward projects and capital overhead. Heal said with the costs of operations and maintenance alone, DPPOA does not take in enough revenue from covenant fees, dues and state highway user revenue funds, all of which amount to about \$60,000, to accomplish everything that is needed in the community without the STD funds. Also, STD status makes the community eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency disaster recovery grants.

In the past the association has used STD funds to rebuild the community boat ramp and create a Community Emergency Response Team and Emergency Operations Center, among other accomplishments, according to Heal's presentation. The new draft budget focuses funding most specifically on roads, stormwater drainage improvements, snow removal, maintaining a reserve account, a project inspector that Heal estimated will save DPPOA \$150,000 in the long run and modifying a purchase clause to allow DPPOA to purchase lots or easements to better manage stormwater.

While roughly 50 people attended the forum, after nearly two hours of comments for or against the proposed budget, only a handful of residents raised their hands in opposition to the draft.

Maria Miller listed numerous reasons why she did not support the draft. One argument, backed by others in the audience, was that the STD review committee that recommended the increase in fees only contains one member of the community, while the rest are DPPOA board members.

"Basically it's the board making recommendations to themselves," she said.

However, treasurer Max Munger said, "We solicit members of the community for those committees. No one came forward."

John Zalusky, who has taken the county to court in the past over the STD budget, said \$166 per lot is nothing trivial.

"I'd rather give it to Doctors Without Borders, people who do good work," he said.

Board member Tricia Powell said she agrees the \$166 may be asking too much of some homeowners who are struggling right now but said the \$50 the commissioners had them at was not enough.

"I'm still wrestling with the \$166," she said, and she added that if the \$166 is not approved, roads still will most likely be a top priority for the association. "Our roads will always be taken care of."

"If we continue keeping it at \$50 a year we're not going to have any reserve funds at all," said board member Duane Heidemann, earning audience applause. "The cost of everything has gone up."

Board secretary John McCall said he visited the Chesapeake Ranch Estates, the other STD community in Calvert, three weeks ago and learned their biggest complaint "was that no one helped them clear the roads after the storm." The reason Drum Point fared better than CRE, he said, was that "we were proactive" by being able to include tree removal in the STD budget — a line item he would like to see stay in fiscal 2013.

Most residents agreed that \$166 was a fair amount to ask of them.

"That's like 40 cents a day," John Gray said. "This community sparkles — absolutely sparkles — compared to others, so I'm gonna support the board."

"When we first moved here the potholes were embarrassing," Susan Holt said, adding that the STD funds have made a significant impact on Drum Point roads. She asked what the consequences would be if the new budget were not approved.

Her husband, Peter, said the CERT and EOC would most likely take a huge hit, and Heal said no STD would be the "worst-case scenario. We would have to curtail operations plain and simple. ... It could just be that we just don't do any projects" or the office would close.

A second forum will take place at 7 p.m. on Nov. 2 at the Drum Point Clubhouse. The BOCC will hold additional hearings before approving the draft STD. The existing budget expires June 30, 2012.

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