

The Free Lance-Star

Supervisors OK Plans for Belle Grove B&B

By Cathy Dyson

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Calling it one of the easy ones, the King George Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a special exception to allow a bed and breakfast at Belle Grove Plantation, the birthplace of James Madison.

“I think it’s a great asset to King George County,” said Supervisor Cedell Brooks Jr. “It’s a beautiful piece of property.”

The five residents who spoke at Tuesday night’s public hearing agreed, as well as two council members from Port Royal, the community across the water from the King George County home off U.S. 301.

“This seems like a wonderful way to share the beauty of this landmark and our Rappahannock River with others,” said Nancy Long, mayor of Port Royal.

Brett and Michelle Darnell are leasing the Belle Grove property from the Austrian company, Fraz Haas Machinery. The Darnells currently live in Chesapeake and will move to the county now that they’ve gotten the special exception from King George.

The Darnells agreed to widen the driveway, but still keep all the trees that lead visitors to the “carriage side” of the home, built in 1791. The grandest side of the house, the “river side,” faces the Rappahannock.

The bed and breakfast will have four suites, all named after people who lived at Belle Grove, including the president himself. It will hold outdoor catered events no more than twice a week with 50 people or fewer. The Darnells agreed to pave a small portion of the entrance, off U.S. 301, and provide a gravel parking lot for the outdoor events.

Several speakers praised the Darnells for their enthusiasm in embracing the history of Belle Grove and sharing it with others. Rich Lorey, a retired Dahlgren worker who said his interest tended more towards science, said he was impressed with Michelle Darnell's knowledge of what happened on the property. Through research, she had discovered an unmarked family burial plot on the grounds. She's happy to share the information she's gathered with visitors, such as Lorey.

"I learned more in that hour and 10 minutes than I could ever have imaged," he said. "The good, the bad and the ugly."

Jean Graham said the King George Historical Society was excited to have another historical property available for residents to enjoy. Resident Ed Veazey said the bed and breakfast would be good for tourism for the whole region.

Others, including Supervisor Joe Grzeika, said the plans looked great, especially considering "some not so welcome ideas being floated for the property" in the past. Three years ago to the month, Belle Grove property owners sought permission to mine sand and gravel on the property. Residents and historians were outraged, and supervisors denied the application. There also were rumors about development.

"Those two possibilities filled us with horror," said Andrew Ball, a neighbor of the historic property. "I think this is the ideal function for Belle Grove."

Brett Darnell told the supervisors that he and his wife will work with neighboring historical groups to learn more about the property. He said they'll also bring back some of the traditions enjoyed by families who lived in Belle Grove over the years. They'll have wine and cheese receptions with mint juleps every day but Sunday, when they'll offer lemonade socials.

One tradition from the past they won't bring back is dueling, Brett Darnell said, smiling. Chairman Dale Sisson Jr joked that was good, since it probably wasn't covered by the special exception.
