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Friday, July 4, 2008

## Fishing, fussing and fireworks

Rascovar on Politics | Barry Rascovar  
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That includes Gov. Martin O'Malley, who has taken the bizarre step of downplaying the significance of the Fourth of July by declaring this to be "Take Me Fishing Day," the third and final free fishing day in Maryland for kids under age 16.

I'm not kidding. O'Malley even issued a press release. So Happy "Take Me Fishing Day" to all you young anglers, even if you won't be able to vote for your generous benefactor.

As for the rest of us, July 4 means fireworks, picnics and remembrance of the sacrifices of our Founding Fathers, who established this grand experiment in democratic government.

Of course in Maryland, the words Democratic Government are capitalized, given the lopsided advantages in voter registration and elected offices the donkey party holds in the Free State, advantages that are growing at the expense of the state's feeble Republican Party.

There's a hilarious NIMBY fight surfacing in Baltimore's elite Roland Park that gives new meaning to the adage: "Do as I say and not as I do."

Lots of "good government" types and blue bloods live in Roland Park, a leafy, 118-year-old planned development with beautiful old trees, rambling Victorian houses and million-dollar properties. The community is run by the Roland Park Civic League, has its own Roads and Maintenance Corp., has its own Community Foundation, still maintains its own Women's Club, has revived the nation's first commercial shopping center, and is home to the area's best private schools and the exclusive Baltimore Country Club.

If you want status in Baltimore, there are two choices: the new Ritz-Carlton waterfront condos or Roland Park. The 110-year-old country club long ago moved the bulk of its activities, particularly its famed golf course, to Five Farms in Baltimore County. What's left is a gorgeous federal-style clubhouse, squash courts, duckpin bowling lanes and paddle tennis courts.

Now the country club wants to sell 17 acres of its property to a respected elder care company, Keswick, which has plans for a continuing care community. The sales price: \$12.5 million. Neighbors are outraged. How dare the country club sell part of its holdings! The move would deprive all those poor little rich kids of free, shaded green space where they can go sledding on steep inclines in the winter.

At a jam-packed meeting of the Civic League this week, Roland Park residents were adamant: Taking care of the elderly is fine in theory, and Keswick is a wonderful organization — but

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NOT in our backyard!

Naturally, weak-willed politicians were there to cheer on the protesters (old folks in nursing homes don't vote but Roland Parkers do).

Del. Jill Carter and state Sen. Lisa Gladden, both African Americans, spoke in favor of giving the neighbors in this virtually all-white community what they want.

Del. Sandy Rosenberg's pandering went even further. He said he will introduce state legislation (also sponsored by Gladden and Del. Nathaniel Oaks) barring retirement-home development at the country club and saving those 17 acres. He called it "valuable, sacred land that needs to be preserved." Suddenly, a continuing care community is deemed an unworthy endeavor if it is proposed for a site that will upset well-heeled voters.

This is a dispute that should not be brought to Annapolis. There is no statewide issue at stake. Why should the state in this one situation discriminate against the elderly, who badly need housing options, so rich families and their children can use those 17 acres as a private park?

Another option would be for Rosenberg & Co. to get the state to buy those 17 acres for land preservation. What an outrage that would be: A \$12.5 million gift to a highly affluent community so it can avoid the inconvenience of having a large elderly community nearby.

Stay tuned. Roland Park's NIMBY protest is just getting started and state politicians are in the thick of it.

Here's an update on Maryland's effort to challenge a new pricing system for back-up electrical power in the region. The state's Public Service Commission claims Marylanders are being overcharged \$2 billion.

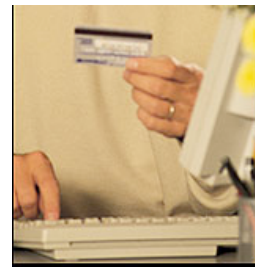
A second consulting firm released a report this week favorably evaluating this new approach that is supposed to encourage utilities to build more power plants by allowing them to charge higher prices.

It said the new approach is "successful" but can be improved. The consulting firm concluded that last year's higher prices persuaded power companies in the region to retain 4,600 megawatts of capacity from older plants that would have been closed otherwise. That's enough back-up capacity to power 4.3 million homes.

Still, we won't know for several years if higher prices convince Maryland utilities to build new plants and find other ways to produce more electricity. If they don't, we could face rolling brownouts.

On that somber note, let's ignite some firecrackers and light up the sky while we can.

Barry Rascovar is a State House columnist and a communications consultant in the Baltimore area.



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