

## Groups rally for open space

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By Jesse Yeatman

Staff Writer

Amid the ballfields and pavilions at Kellam's Recreational Complex in Chesapeake Beach, land preservation groups last week pleaded for local and state politicians to keep funding in place for Program Open Space, Maryland's leading land preservation program.

"Program Open Space makes it possible to save those spaces through the funds it generates," Jennifer Bevan-Dangel of Environment Maryland said on July 21 at a small political rally.

Started in 1969, the program is funded through a 1/2 percent real estate transfer tax that must be used to fund local and state land conservation and park development programs.

"All of that money is to go to preserve land," she said.

More than 800,000 acres have been preserved in the state, along with the creation of more than 4,000 parks, since the program's inception. Kellam's Recreational Complex and recent upgrades to the park were paid for in part by Program Open Space.

The rapid pace of development in Maryland recently has pushed the urgency of the funding even further. Bevan-Dangel said that keeping farms, forests and parks from turning into strip malls and parking lots is among the most important environmental issues facing the state.

"We did invite some local candidates," Bevan-Dangel said at the rally last Friday. "Unfortunately they're not here."

Del. Sue Kullen (D-Calvert) did show up part way through the event to show her support for the program.



Staff Photo by Jesse Yeatman

Land preservationists speak at a political rally at Kellam's Recreational Complex in Chesapeake Beach on July 21. Pictured above, from left, are Bob Boxwell of Cove Point Natural Heritage Trust, members of Environment Maryland Ruthie Gordon and Edyta Sitko, Partners for Open Space campaign director Marcia Verploegen Lewis, Del. Sue Kullen (D-Calvert) and Tom Ross, executive director of Maryland Recreation and Parks Association.

“One of the things I noticed right away is the short sightedness in the budget,” she said of her foray into state government that began with an appointment to the seat in 2004. “We have to have a vital pot of money that is not being stolen from.”

Some years the 1969 law is amended and some of the money is diverted from the fund to the state’s general budget, said Marcia Verploegen Lewis, campaign director for Partners for Open Space. That allows the state government to spend the transfer tax on other uses.

Lewis said that her group, which coordinates more than 140 land preservation agencies, wants candidates to take a pledge to fully support Program Open Space and not to divert money away from it in upcoming years.

Last year, fiscal year 2007, was the first time in four years the entire conservation fund was used for its intended purpose. The four years previous more than \$480 million was taken out of Program Open Space funds and moved to other places in the budget, Lewis said.

“When it was initially put in, I thought it was a great idea,” Bob Boxwell of Cove Point Natural Heritage Trust said. “I just wish the government would obey the law.”

With a looming billion-dollar deficit in the state budget next year, Lewis, Boxwell and others are worried that the program funds will again be in jeopardy.

“Program Open Space is critical to park and recreation areas throughout the state and on the county and local levels,” said Tom Ross, executive director of Maryland Recreation and Parks Association. Other land preservation groups present at the event included the American Chestnut Land Trust, Cove Point Natural Heritage Trust and Southern Calvert Land Trust.

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