

Morris H. Wolf, land developer, dies at 71

By Lindsey Robbins

Aegis staff

Morris H. Wolf, a land developer who worked for more than 40 years bringing numerous communities to Harford County, died Oct. 14 at Gilchrist Center for Hospice Care in Towson. He was 71.

Although he lived in Baltimore, Mr. Wolf spent much of his time in Harford County, crafting communities that would be responsible for bringing thousands of new homes and many thousands of people to Harford County.

The Aegis once referred to Mr. Wolf as one of the county's most successful tract developers, and Mr. Wolf didn't seem at all defensive about the kind of work he did, even though developers have long been the whipping boys of local politicians and community leaders looking to make a name for themselves.

For many years, Mr. Wolf's personal vehicles bore the vanity tag "Dvelopr," and he often could be given to introspection about his work. Once, when a community group was protesting the expansion of one his projects, Mr. Wolf said: "You know, I brought most of these people to Harford County in the first place."

Mr. Wolf grew up in the Jewish enclave of Northwest Baltimore that produced a number of prominent Maryland businessmen and political leaders in the post-World War II generation. He earned a law degree from University of Baltimore but went on to spend most of his adult life in the land development business.

Although he developed communities elsewhere in the Baltimore region, Mr. Wolf was most active in Harford County, where he was comfortable dealing with local elected officials and was active in a number of organizations, particularly the Route 40 Business Association. He was also philanthropic on a local scale but was very private about charitable organizations and individuals in need whom he helped.

"Of all the large developers in the county at the time, including Ward & Bosley, Dale Hess and Victor Posner, [Mr. Wolf] was the most successful in his span," said Richard Morris of Bel Air, retired founder and president of Morris & Ritchie Associates, an Abingdon based engineering firm that designed many of Mr. Wolf's projects.

Mr. Wolf was responsible for establishing such communities as Gunpowder Farms in Joppa, Vineyard Oak near

Hickory, Laurel Valley in Abingdon, Woodbridge Center in Edgewood, Singer Woods in Abingdon, Laurel Woods in Abingdon, Broadview in Abingdon and Bynum Overlook near Creswell. He also helped revive communities that had fallen into bankruptcy, such as Country Walk in Emmorton and the former Phoenix Enterprises property, southwest of Bel Air.

One of his major projects was the 1995 development of Harford Town, a townhouse community a few yards from the first county seat on Route 7 in Abingdon. Although some questioned his decision to build on an area near the closed Bush Valley Landfill property — a federal Superfund site, Mr. Wolf had no qualms.

"He knew what he wanted and he got it done. It was incredible the amount of work he did for the small size of his operation," Morris said.

Morris met Mr. Wolf 40 years ago when Morris was a young engineer and had begun working for Frederick Ward Associates in Bel Air. Mr. Wolf was the first client with whom Morris worked.

"He was tough, an extremely good businessman with a good head for details," Morris said. "He also had a great talent for doing math in his head, unusual for a man without a technical background."

He explained Mr. Wolf's attention to details led to his being intimately involved in every decision concerning any of his projects, right down to the naming of streets and the location of trees.

Lawyer William D. Hooper Jr. of Bel Air, former attorney for Harford County government, added Mr. Wolf was the not the kind of guy to build and then leave. Hooper represented Mr. Wolf for many years in zoning cases.

He said that until the homeowners associations in his communities were turned over to the owners themselves, Mr. Wolf sat in at the HOA meetings.

"He didn't come from the county, but he was concerned about the way he developed land. He wanted to create good homes with few problems," Hooper said.

He was also considered an innovator in development. He was among the first to put landscaping berms on the outer edges of developments to screen them from highways, which since has become common practice.

"You can see it all along 924," said Del. Joanne Parrott, who, as a county council member Wolf often invited to the home owners

association meetings, so residents would know their county government representative.

"He would do things other builders and developers would not do," Parrott added.

When developing the former O'Neill property just outside the town of Bel Air for a community called Trails at Gleneagles, Mr. Wolf pledged to provide a portion of the former Ma & Pa Railroad right-of-way running through the property, so the county could develop a public walking trail.

When it came to dealing with local governments, Mr. Wolf preferred to negotiate and compromise, rather than demand.

As a result, many who knew Mr. Wolf praised his gentlemanly personality.

"If you went to him with an issue on a project and he told you he was going to do something, he did it. But he never backed you against a wall either. He didn't rattle the cage," said Harford County Councilwoman Veronica "Roni" Chenowith.

Chenowith pointed out that some said Mr. Wolf had too much say in the county, but she never saw any of that.

"More than anything, he was a man of his word," she added.

Morris said Mr. Wolf was consistent.

"Whether you like land development or not, you have to give the guy credit for doing exactly what he set out to do," he said.

Mr. Wolf was also an avid bill fisherman, according to Hooper. They took several trips to Ocean City, where Hooper caught his first marlin on Mr. Wolf's boat. Mr. Wolf had a winter home in Florida, and for many years would sail his boat south in the winter and bring it back to Ocean City in the spring.

Mr. Wolf is survived by his wife, Barbara Wolf of Baltimore; five daughters, Deborah Wolf of Middlesex, Vt., Cynthia Wolf of Rushford, Minn., Pamela Wolf of Brookline, Mass., Kimberly Kupfer of Camp Hill, Pa., and Elizabeth Wolf of Redding, Conn.; a son, Christopher Chiapparelli of New York City, four sons-in-law, a daughter-in-law, a brother, 14 grandchildren and many nieces and nephews.

Services were Oct. 16 at Sol Levinson & Bros Inc. in Pikesville. Interment was in Beth El Memorial Park in Randallstown.

Memorial contributions may be sent to S. Florida Keys Children's Foundation, 8 Channel Cay Road, N. Key Largo, Fla., 33037.