

AGRARIAN BEAUTY BUNDORAN FARM

BY JOHN KELLY

Generations from now, Albemarle County residents will gather to talk about a time when one of the region's most spectacular pieces of land was full of rolling pastures, ponds, farm animals, and views that seemed to fade into forever. Then, to hear the developers of Bundoran Farm tell it, these same people might just pause, smile and say, "Some things never change."

This is the story of Bundoran Farm, a spectacular gem in a fast-fading landscape of agrarian beauty that has forever been a hallmark of Albemarle County life. The 2300-acre parcel, like so many in the region, had long been the property of family farmers who were constantly fielding offers from suitors while looking at a next generation of would-be stewards who were pursuing other paths in life.

Fortunately for everyone involved, the steward in this case was Fred Scott, whose family had owned the farm for more than 60 years. As he thought about the future of his property, he often wondered why there were not people out there who did this kind of development in a more respectful way. How could he ensure that this family and community treasure would avoid ending up on an auction block one day? He had heard from enough developers with deep pockets. What he was looking for was one with a deep sense of commitment. Then one day he found it by turning a simple page.

The story goes that Scott was flipping through a magazine at a bed and breakfast where he was staying when he came across a story about Qroe Farm Preservation Development, a then New Hampshire-based company that was changing the paradigm of rural development by saving, not engulfing, the family farm. Their plan, in fact, involved strengthening this mainstay of American business and culture by engaging in market-driven conservation development.

Scott went home and contacted the company's CEO, Robert Baldwin, Sr. Before starting his company, Baldwin had a successful career in banking and manufacturing in the Boston area, and found himself on several planning commissions. "He would just get sick about what he was seeing," said David Hamilton, project manager for Bundoran Farm, "which was basically big developers showing up with really bad proposals. The environmental community would show up to yell at him. The planning department had little to offer, adding some more arguing for a couple of meetings before compromising on a few





issues and moving on to their next project. The only people who never got to weigh in was the farmer, who had gotten his check and was out of there.”

Baldwin looked at it another way. Why, he thought, could they not get all the groups together beforehand and talk about how to protect the various interests in the project? “It’s kind of a neat story of what one man, one highly motivated and very smart man, with no training whatsoever in urban planning, can do when he gets angry,” Hamilton said.

The two men, family farm owner and visionary developer, instantly found their common ground. Scott has said that they struck the deal for the property over the course of six emails, and the rest was just details.

Baldwin’s “Preservation Development” approach combines land and farm preservation with extremely low density residential development. For instance, in the case of Bundoran Farm, the developers’ plans call for as much as 90% of the land to be protected in perpetuity from further residential development, preserving not only the natural beauty and ecological importance of the property itself, but also the very way of life it represents.

The key element in the entire process may well have been communication. It was Scott himself who first introduced the new owners to the neighbors and allowed them to explain their most novel approach.

“We got to know our neighbors and listened to them,” Hamilton said. “From a zoning perspective, you can do a dense project or a low density project. You can do a good project or a bad project, but the things we addressed from the very beginning at Bundoran Farm were things our neighbors had never heard addressed by a developer . . . things like view shed, maintaining the rural character of an area. This kind of low density approach runs counter to a lot of principles that are popular in this region. It is basically about accepting that there will be change but working to lower the overall impact of that change on people’s lives.”

Serendipity was at work again when another group did its homework on the leaders in this unique field and also found itself knocking on Baldwin’s doors. That company was Celebration Associates, a nationally recognized developer of award-winning, master-planned, mixed use communities in the southeastern United States. The com-

pany, started by its Principal and Managing Partner Charles Adams and his Co-Founder and Partner Don Killoren, is well known in our region for its Homestead Preserve project in Hot Springs, Virginia.

“Celebration is among the very best design-conscious developers,” Hamilton said. “They understand how architecture plays into a community, and they are very good at communicating their story of various kinds of development. Here are people who come from the world of ‘new urbanism,’ traditional high-density communities, and they kept seeing these farms getting mowed over by conventional developers. They started thinking, ‘What are we going to do with these farms?’”

According to recent statistics, Hamilton said, America is losing as many as a million acres of farmland each year. Right here in Virginia the number is at 70,000 acres. “If you look at just the numbers in Virginia,” Hamilton said, “that is five times the land area of Manhattan that we are plowing under every year. And once farmland is gone, it doesn’t come back.”

After asking a new employee to research the best in the conservation-friendly development field, Adams and Killoren found that all roads again led to Qroe’s Derry, New Hampshire, headquarters. Soon after forming their partnership, Qroe and Celebration put together a team and threw





themselves deeply into the planning process, one that was based on exhaustive, multidisciplinary studies of every aspect of the land. Hamilton and his family immediately moved onto the property and reached out to neighbors and other community members to share the evolving plans.

After a year and a half of study, countless walking miles logged on every inch of the property, and many, many hours spent with neighbors and community members to explain the project, the final development plan was created. It includes only 108 home sites and expansive communal land that allows residents to take advantage of all that the land has to offer.

The core of the Bundoran Farm project, and of Preservation Development as a theory and practice, is the notion of a working farm at the core of a residential community. "I think that represents a struggle that everyone in this community who grew up with an agricultural economy is interested in," Hamilton said. "But the economies of real estate versus agriculture

are very different. You are not going to address it with government alone via easements. You need to have models of how agricultural land gets protected and integrated into a community."

The property's working farm is leased to Adventure Farm and managed by Carl Kinder, president of the local farm bureau, who runs some 300 head of cattle there. It also includes the back of house orchard for the Chiles family's Carter Mountain orchard operation.

One of the ways that Bundoran Farm helps ensure the integrity of the land on which it sits is by placing universal building restrictions on each plot of land in a way that officials say ultimately benefits each owner. "How it works at Bundoran," Hamilton said, "is that your lot line in most cases is not very meaningful. What you are really buying is a home site. You have about half an acre you can build on, and outside of that you have a two-acre box which is really your domain, with no trails or agriculture running through it.

But outside of that, agriculture is allowed to go back and forth across any landowner's property. And each owner has a right, a deeded easement, to hop off your home site and get on a 20-mile network of trails and take advantage of any of the recreational amenities available."

A major hurdle standing in the project's way early on in the process was a public hearing before the Planning Commission. Especially in rural areas, where officials are cognizant of the rapidly disappearing open space, beautiful views, and threatened ecosystems, this can represent a difficult step in the developers' road to final approval. It is this stage where commission members can traditionally wait for developers with sharpened knives. And here you had a group who was presenting the largest project by acreage in the county's history. Bundoran Farm is, after all, nearly one-third the size of Charlottesville itself.

What happened next was extraordinary and nearly unprecedented. The developers showed up with a veritable army of support

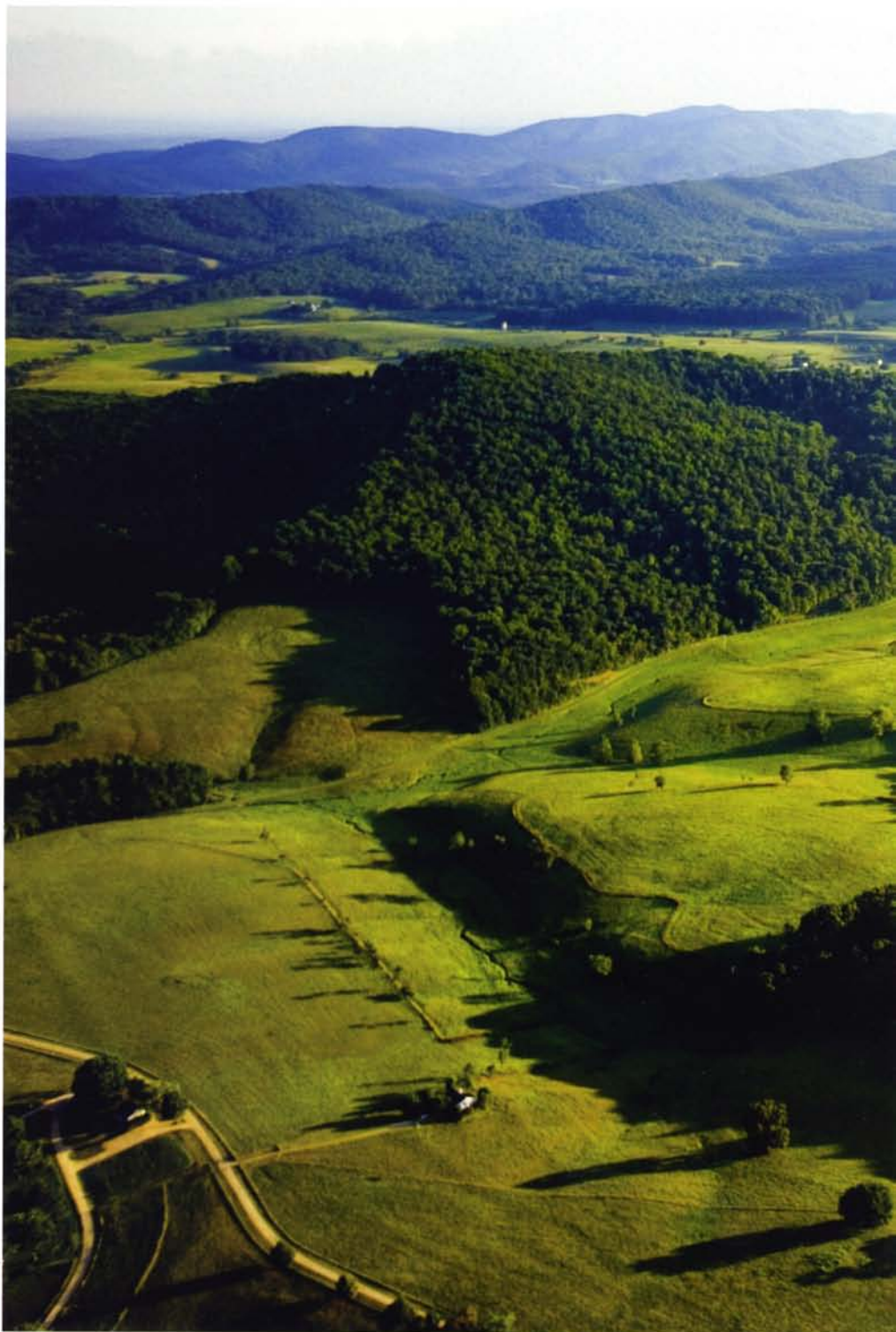
in the form of neighbors who spoke passionately in support of the project. "I have been involved in a number of projects and to have one where you have so many people come to a public hearing and speak on behalf of what you are doing as a developer says a lot," said Joe Barnes, a Celebration Associates partner and director of architecture on the Bundoran Farm project. "We really spent the time up front to develop the relationships and make sure we had a clear understanding of what people felt was important in Charlottesville."

Barnes had a pretty good understanding of that himself, having spent years here as a UVA undergrad getting a degree in architecture and then earning his MBA at Darden. These experiences offered him special insight into the appeal of the region and the project. "The beauty of the landscape, the rolling hills, the way the forests are managed, and the fields and pastures . . . it is just so nice to be involved with something where you are protecting and preserving what people are coming here for, rather than just taking advantage of it."

At this point, it would have been hard to imagine things going any smoother for the project. All that changed on June 14, 2006. That morning, a plane carrying Robert Baldwin, Sr., and Qroe Companies regional director David Brown fell from the sky and crashed onto the Bundoran property. The crash took the lives of both men, devastating friends, families, colleagues, and even mere acquaintances here and in communities up and down the eastern seaboard.

Only weeks before, I had the chance to meet both of these men at Bundoran Farm during a special media event. They were kind. They were real. They were engaged and engaging. And their passion for the project and for what they did was clear and contagious.

Now, in a matter of a few tragic moments, a project that had always been about legacies became even more so. "It is a business we are in," Hamilton said, "but I really think it's also important to recognize that what Bob Baldwin started here and got together with Charles Adams to continue is intended to be a model of what can happen to productive land in areas where development pressure exists. This is not a Virginia problem, or an Albemarle County problem, it is anywhere within 200 miles of a major city."



One person who recognized this was Robert Baldwin, Jr., who after many years of working with his father and understanding the passion he brought to every one of his projects, was writing his own success story as a developer focusing heavily on urban projects. He soon took over as CEO of Qroe and was heading up the Bundoran Farm project. Until the day of the crash, he had never set foot in Albemarle County, but felt very much like he had.

"I had been hearing about Bundoran Farm and the people here for years. My father was more excited about this project

than anything he had ever done," Baldwin said. "It was very exciting for me to get down there and get involved, to see what he saw and talk to the people he had spoken to, and to help make this legacy a reality. I always say thank goodness for Bundoran Farm, because my father had been working all his life, focusing really hard the last 15 or 20 years, trying to advance the concept of farm preservation and of the conservation development model long before it became cool. Bundoran Farm absolutely represents the culmination of this passion and this vision."



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The elder Baldwin's legacy will also live on through the Baldwin Center for Preservation Development, the heart of a community foundation at Bundoran that will help to maximize the environmental efforts of planning officials, land owners, farmers, students, and many others. "It was always our intention to have a foundation that would look at and study the land and look at how you develop in a rural area. We couldn't think of a more fitting tribute than to name it in honor of Bob Baldwin."

Bundoran Farm has been chosen to participate in Audubon International's

Signature Sanctuary program and is likely to earn the organization's Gold Program certification. Audubon International consultants have worked closely with the developers from the earliest stages of the project to shape the development plan and provide expertise in areas including overall design, stream crossings, and interior forest preserves. The organization is also providing a full-time Natural Resources Manager in residence on the property.

And in a project that is now all about honoring the legacies of great land and good men, all involved hope that their

example will live on far beyond the hills of Central Virginia. According to Barnes, the legacies are already having an impact outside of the project. "Our ability to take some of this land out of play from a traditional real estate development perspective and preserve the character of the landscape is something that is getting a lot of attention from people around the country who love what we are doing."

For more information on the Bundoran Farm project, visit www.bundoranfarm.com.

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