

Belward Farm and our Truth- and Transparency-Challenged County

Once again, Montgomery County's deficiencies regarding truth and transparency have come to light in the Brickyard organic farm [debacle](#).

But let's not forget another of the County's boondoggles: Belward Farm. The County worked hand-in-hand with Johns Hopkins University to deceive the farm's late owner, Elizabeth Banks. As Fred Fransen, Executive Director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education [wrote](#): "What's particularly troublesome is that local officials, in effect, became co-conspirators in the university's effort to shaft the donor."

An internal Johns Hopkins University [letter from 1988](#) recounts just how the County, thwarted in their efforts to convince Ms. Banks to develop her property, contacted Johns Hopkins "sub rosa" (i.e. secretly), for help. Former County Chief Administrative Officer Bill Hussman "was advised by County Councilman Bill Hanna that rezoning would be difficult unless...Hopkins involvement was proposed."

Several meetings later, "it was agreed that a wooded section of approximately 30-35 acres [on what is now Key West Avenue] could be developed commercially by the University if the University would be willing to restrict the remainder of 100 acres to 'academic and related purposes'." In other words, the 35-acre parcel was to be developed commercially to raise funds to develop the academic parcel.

The letter confirms both the County and Johns Hopkins knew Ms. Banks' "very strong opinions about the ultimate use of the property; she is adamantly opposed to residential and most commercial development."

It was under these conditions that, in 1989, Ms. Banks gifted Belward Farm to JHU for the bargain price of \$5 million for an academic campus, even though Ms. Banks had been offered up to \$54 million from other developers.

But in 1998, Hopkins gave the smaller parcel to the County in exchange for its support in developing the remaining 100 acres. By this time Hopkins already had a development plan agreed upon by Ms. Banks and her family. Which begs the question: why was the county's help necessary?

Because that was not the end of the story.

After Ms. Banks' death in 2005, Hopkins worked with the County to rezone Belward Farm for a high-density, high-rise commercial office complex that would accommodate 15,000 workers in buildings up to 14 stories high. County officials knew this was in direct opposition to the intentions of the late owner, but fast-tracked the plan for approval with the support of two out of three Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee Members: Mike Knapp, a biotech consultant, County Councilman and Committee Chair; Nancy Floreen, who never met a developer she didn't love; and Royce Hanson, a staunch supporter of the new plan and Chair of the Planning Board.

It appears that the officials at Johns Hopkins wrote the deed with enough language to convince Elizabeth Banks that the University would honor her intentions. But also with enough loopholes that they hoped would give them the option to completely ignore those promises in order to maximize their profits on the property with a massive commercial office complex once she was out of the picture.

And, in a long litany of [similar cases](#), Montgomery County has proved that its officials have no problem working behind the scenes to shaft not only the Belward Farm's donor but the residents of the county as well.

Let's hope Banks' family wins its lawsuit and the Courts force Johns Hopkins to recognize her donor intent and require the County's truth and transparency regarding Belward Farm.

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