

Border Splits Apartments, Sparks Spat

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By Ovetta Wiggins

Helga Massa didn't think she was going far when she sold her home in Silver Spring last year and moved to an apartment in Riderwood Village, a retirement community just three miles away.

But when Massa filed a change-of-address form with the Montgomery County Board of Elections, she and dozens of her new neighbors learned that, despite their Silver Spring location and a "Welcome to Montgomery County" sign outside, they had become residents of Prince George's County when they moved to Riderwood.

That's because the 150-acre campus, just off Route 29 near the Capital Beltway, straddles the Montgomery-Prince George's line.

"I've lived in Montgomery County since I came to this country 40 years ago," said Massa, a native of Austria. "It never occurred to me that I would suddenly be in Prince George's."

The border disorder has created unusual residency problems for tenants. It also has reignited a mini-border war between the counties over Prince George's residents who want to move to Montgomery not by packing up and leaving, but by redrawing the map.

In the Hampton Square building where Massa lives -- the newest of six in Riderwood -- 93 of the 163 apartments are in Montgomery County and 35 are in Prince George's. The rest, including Massa's unit, are bisected by the county line.

"There have been people who were registered in Montgomery County and they are called for jury duty in Prince George's County," said Fred Irish, a Riderwood resident who worked with both counties' boards of election to identify who belonged where. "It's really a mess."

The Montgomery Board of Elections resolved the voting question before the March 2 Maryland primary based on the location of each resident's bedroom, deciding that is the room in which people spend most of their time.

That means that Hampton Square tenant Josephine Warde, who resides in Prince George's when she cooks her meals or sits on her sofa, but who bathes and retires for the night in Montgomery, will vote in Montgomery.

"I've had a lot of good laughs about it," said Warde, who moved last year from Connecticut. "Especially when I heard it came down to where you spend the most time."

Seeking one county to call home, residents of Riderwood's bifurcated apartments asked state lawmakers last year to move them wholly into Montgomery.

Montgomery County's House delegation tried to comply, approving a bill this year to redraw the boundary line so that Montgomery would absorb the fragmented units. The measure required a referendum in which affected tenants would formally approve the secession of land.

But the Prince George's delegation refused to consider the proposal.

We've been through this battle before," said Del. Doyle L. Niemann (D), who chairs the Prince George's delegation committee that reviews legislation affecting both counties. "My personal opinion is we'd be happy to consider it if it is all put in Prince George's County. In fact, the whole complex should be put in Prince George's County."

Prince George's officials are still peeved that some Bowie residents, citing crowded schools and budget cuts, pushed in 2000 to break away and join Anne Arundel County. The effort fizzled when state Sen. Ida G. Ruben (D-Montgomery) withdrew her offer to draft enabling legislation. Ruben took the stance after some disparaging remarks about Prince George's, attributed to the Bowie residents, were published.

In 1995, Takoma Park -- which straddled the Prince George's-Montgomery border for 107 years -- voted to unite with Montgomery, ultimately costing Prince George's thousands of residents.

Supporters of Riderwood's back-to-Montgomery campaign say there is no comparison between the two scenarios.

"This isn't like that at all," said Doris Phelps, who heads the community's political education committee. "But I think that is the way [Prince George's lawmakers] see it. Of course there's the tax money. Maybe that's why they are against it. But the situation is so confusing that I don't know if the right [county] is collecting the taxes."

Niemann, however, said the principle is the same even though the Riderwood situation involves far fewer people.

"Boundaries are arbitrary and capricious things, and yet they exist," Niemann said. "Do we want to redraw them every time someone says they have a reason to redraw them? . . . If we did, there might be a number of residents that would want to come and go from one county to another."

This year, Del. Karen S. Montgomery (D-Montgomery) said she hoped Prince George's didn't view the bill as a "land grab."

"It's not about getting voters," said Montgomery, who sponsored the bill needed for the secession. "When people moved there, they assumed they were in Montgomery County. It's just about helping some older people."

County officials say they can recall only one other instance in which boundaries created this kind of problem.

In 1987, Martin and Mildred Darnall, a Laurel couple who had spent 40 years assuming they were full-fledged Prince George's residents, learned in the process of putting their restaurant up for sale that a portion of their three-acre property was in Montgomery. A little-noticed 1968 boundary adjustment claimed a third of the land and a slice of the restaurant, the Hitching Post. The couple asked the General Assembly to move them back into Prince George's.

The legislature approved the bill and, in what may be the most narrowly cast referendum in the annals of local government, the Darnalls voted in 1990 to move all of their property into Prince George's.

The confusion over Riderwood started after it changed hands in 1999. Until then, it was the site of Great Oaks, a state-run home for the developmentally disabled. When it was a state institution, the boundary line was not much of an issue.

"It's unusual, but it's not unheard of," Tom Lockard, a planner with the development review division in Prince George's, said of the geographical oddity.

Still, Lockard said he was not surprised this winter when he heard about the problems with voter registration. He recalled the late council member Walter H. "Mike" Maloney, a strong opponent of many development projects during his tenure, raising the boundary issue.

"The applicant said, 'It is what it is,' " Lockard said, recalling the hearing. "They said if it's going to be a problem, we could shift the building. . . . [Maloney] brought it up, but nothing happened after that. [They] didn't feel as though it was important enough to put a condition in there."

Phelps said the group has no ill feelings toward Prince George's.

"It's not an anti-Prince George's thing at all," she said. "It just makes sense. It's logical."

Warde said it ultimately didn't matter which county decided to take her in. "I figure I'm going to have to pay taxes in one or the other," she said. "The landscape is the same, whether I look out this window or that one. The sun shines on both, and it rains on both, too."

The Montgomery-Prince George's border runs through Josephine Warde's living room, but it doesn't bother her much: "I figure I'm going to have to pay taxes in one or the other."