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GUEST OPINION: Prince William County's most historic and natural treasures must be protected from development

By Kim Hosen, Max Hokit, Dan Holmes, Pam Goddard and Nancy Vehrs
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Manassas National Battlefield Park
National Park Service/Bill Crabtree Jr.

Four hundred twenty-three units of the National Park System grace our nation, from vast wildernesses like the Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska, to historic spots like Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

Only a fraction of counties in the nation are fortunate enough to have a site of national significance in their backyard — and Prince William County is one of them! It has not only one, but two notable NPS units within its boundaries: Prince William Forest Park and Manassas

National Battlefield Park. Unfortunately, these parks — historic, open spaces that welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors each year — are situated in a rapidly developing region and, therefore, face a very real danger.

The latest development craze appears to be massive data centers. Recently, despite public opposition, the land-use of an area just inside the congressionally authorized boundary of Prince William Forest Park was changed to allow for the possible construction of a future data center. Now, the Prince William County Board of Supervisors is poised to consider a data center proposal between Manassas National Battlefield Park and Conway Robinson State Forest on a pristine rural landscape that witnessed some of the heaviest fighting during the 1862 Battle of Second Manassas.

Both of Prince William County's NPS sites speak to trying times in our nation's past. The battlefield land represents not only a period of heart-wrenching combat, but also a decisive moment during the Civil War. The battle there in late July 1862 ultimately led to the Maryland Campaign, which culminated at the Battle of Antietam, still the bloodiest day in American history. Manassas National Battlefield Park, remembering both this battle and the first major land battle of the war, the Battle of First Manassas or Bull Run, was established in 1940.

Meanwhile, Prince William Forest Park grew out of the Great Depression. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration established back-to-work programs designed to create new infrastructure projects — among them Recreation Demonstration Areas (RDA), to provide outdoor experiences for urban children.

In Prince William County, 15,000 acres of pristine farmland were identified and became the Chopawamsic RDA, which opened to some 2,000 young campers from Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1936. During World War II, the park land was leased to the War Department as a training base for American covert operations. After the war, the site returned to its youth-oriented, recreational roots and picked up its permanent name in 1948.

Today, when social distancing requirements have made accessible outdoor experiences especially important, we should applaud the foresight of that earlier generation in preserving natural and historic landscapes that we may now enjoy. But what are we leaving for our own

grandchildren to one day enjoy and explore? So many once-pristine areas of Northern Virginia have been lost to development that we must now strategically examine the new proposals that come before us for consideration.

For decades, the county's "rural crescent" has protected much of the remaining, fragile open space in Prince William County, including the Occoquan Reservoir watershed, with a corridor of restricted development stretching the length of the county and connecting the two national parks.

Prince William County already allows for high density development, like the data centers recently proposed, in various areas as by-right uses under current zoning. So, why the urgency to further develop some of the last pieces of unaltered open space in the county? The very act of designating land as eligible for further development increases its value, and so developers would rather seek an agreement to develop open space land and then seek a rezoning from the county. The prospect of undermining the county's comprehensive plan with piecemeal and unnecessary rezoning, especially when more appropriate and less historically sensitive properties are available, is problematic on many levels.

Once these lands are developed, they are lost forever. That is why the Prince Williams Conservation Alliance was joined by a broad coalition of groups that include the American Battlefield Trust, the Piedmont Environmental Council, the National Parks Conservation Association and the Virginia Native Plant Society in the preparation of this piece expressing concerns about these data centers. In order to respect the land that holds our American story and keeps us connected to the great outdoors, the Prince William County Board of County Supervisors should not move forward with changes that would allow intense and incompatible development adjacent to its two national parks.

Clarification: This op-ed has been updated to note that the Prince William Board of County Supervisors changed the long-term land-use designation of an area just inside the congressionally authorized boundary of Prince William Forest Park to allow for the possible construction of a future data center -- not the imminent construction of a data center.

The authors are members of the following organizations and are writing on their behalf: Kim Hosen, the Prince William Conservation Alliance; Max Hokit, the American Battlefield Trust; Dan Holmes, the Piedmont Environmental Council; and Pam Goddard, National Parks Conservation Association; and Nancy Vehrs, Virginia Native Plant Society.

