

Levitt & Sons' Vision for Strathmore at Bel Pre

1965 Testimony by Levitt & Sons before the Montgomery County Council

Montgomery County (Md.) Council. *Transcript of Proceedings: Application for Amendment to the Zoning Map – Nos. E-187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196 and 197*, Alderson Reporting Co., Washington, DC, July 22, 1965, pp. 26 to 33:

[R. Robert Linowes, Attorney for Contee Company and the Estate of Harry Gudelsky]: If you will note here, the area which is shown in heavy green is all area for which single family residential development is proposed. It is proposed both the R-90, which is overlaying, existing, R-150, the buffer line. This area comprises approximately 415 of the total approximately 500 acres which is before you and for your consideration. The area comprises approximately 83 percent of the total tract.

Because of the nature of the quadrants, because of the intricacy and necessity for careful planning, and development, it is proposed this total tract of land will be developed on a joint, cooperative basis. For the single family, for the single family development shown in the heavy green on the model, the firm of Levitt & Sons, Inc., international builders of international reputation, is proposed to develop this particular community under their trade name of Strathmore. I do not know how many of you are familiar with the Strathmore concept. These are the custom built, higher priced homes that Levitt & Sons have built so very successfully, both to the community as well as the residents' best interests in various places, in Long Island and in New Jersey.

The development here, and the land here has been studied in quite some detail. Levitt & Sons before they made the determination to select Montgomery County, or this particular location, looked for at least several years after making a thorough investigation of the metropolitan Washington area, they determined that Montgomery County was, in fact, the proper location for this type of custom homes. After conducting a further rather extensive search they determined that this particular area and this particular location was proper and was the one for such development.

We have here today on behalf of Levitt & Sons, Richard Rosen, who is a community planner on the staff of Levitt Company.

Mr. Rosen, prior to joining Levitt & Sons had extensive experience in both public and private planning agencies, and planning projects. He worked throughout the country and immediately prior to joining Levitt & Sons, was the chief planner in the development of a 9,000 acre city in Irvine, California. Mr. Rosen, along with the other Members of the extensive Levitt organization, made a study of the land, made a study of the community. I would like at this time to have Mr. Rosen present to you the type of development which they propose, the nature of the development which they propose for this particular tract in Montgomery County.

STATEMENT OF RICHARD ROSEN,

c/o R. ROBERT LINOWES, ATTORNEY,
8701 GEORGIA AVENUE, SILVER SPRING, MD.

MR. ROSEN: Thank you, Mrs. Hepburn, Miss Diggs, Members of the Council.

If I may, I would like to sit by the slide projector and illustrate my talk.

Levitt & Sons is especially well qualified to develop those portions of this property for which single family residential zones are requested, because of the company's diversified and extensive background in upper income level, high quality suburban communities. This may come as somewhat of a surprise to you because the company's extensive activity since World War II in volume building, helping to satisfy the post war housing shortage have tended to overshadow a 36 year career as a major builder of prestige housing.

I would like to trace this history for you, to show you the type of housing which would be developed if Zoning Applications E-187 through 197 were approved.

In the early 1930's Levitt & Sons, Inc., acquired several large estates on the desirable North Shore of Long Island, at Manhasset, Great Neck and Roslyn. In what was to become three well planned, self-contained garden suburbs of approximately, 1,000 homes each, a total of over 2800 homes were built in the 1930's and 1940's.

Strathmore Vanderbilt demonstrates the use of planning techniques pioneered by Frederick Law Olmstead. For traffic safety, there are a minimum of street crossings; preferred "T" intersections are used extensively. The streets are laid out to follow the contours of the land, a technique that is essential if the natural woodland is to be fully preserved, although this entails the sacrifice of many lots that might have been created were a more conventional gridiron plan used. Hardly ever is a straight street used, and where a particularly fine specimen tree occurs, the street is made to pass around it.

The Strathmore communities, as these garden suburbs are each called, were planned around private country clubs, one of the first and perhaps the most significant early application of the integrally designed homeowner's association. The Village Bath and Tennis Club, is located at the core of Strathmore Village next to a well planned convenience shopping center which forms the core of the community. Completely concealed utility distribution systems were used, as are as many as a dozen different house styles, intermixed on varying lot sizes, each appropriate to the size house and character of the land and vegetation.

Here, lot sizes of 6500 to 10,000 square feet were used, and freely intermixed for variety of appearance. This technique all but eliminates the appearance of a community built at one time by a single developer.

We carefully select a location and orientation for each house to best preserve the trees on the individual lots. Under the watchful eye of company supervisors natural features are carefully preserved as illustrated in these scenes of a postwar section of Strathmore Village. Where this has not been possible, the generous planting of shade trees and fruit trees quickly married the newly created landscape to the old.

Quality construction and values are equally essential. Several weeks ago, I personally perused the files of the major realtor in Manhasset to determine what the typical Levitt & Sons house was selling for 15 to 30 years after it was built. I discovered that the pre-war Colonial or Tudor home of seven to nine rooms which sold for \$9,000 to \$12,000 in the late thirties, is today worth from \$35,000 to \$65,000 with an average of about \$45,000.

Most of the increase in value can be attributed to the improvements of property that are found in a community characterized by stability, sound planning, and high quality construction.

Because of this, tax rates in Great Neck, Manhasset and Roslyn are today among the lowest on Long Island, while the quality of the schools and other municipal services are generally accepted to be about the best in the New York metropolitan area.

At the present time, the company is building three communities of the price level and character that are appropriate to Montgomery County and that we intend to build at Strathmore-at-Bel Pre.

Strathmore at Stonybrook, further out on the north shore of Long Island is another area where we have been able to retain the natural trees on practically all of the lots. Price range up to \$30,000. This rendering illustrates the \$300,000 private swimming and tennis club facility that will soon be built for this 1900 home community.

This is a slide of Lakeridge, at Madison Township, New Jersey, a 314 home community where each homeowner is automatically and in perpetuity, a member of a mandatory homeowner's association charged with maintaining a 45 acre greenbelt surrounding the community on three sides, and including this lakefront sailing and ice skating pavilion, bath and tennis club, hiking, trails and a picnic grove.

The basic price of the four houses offered vary from \$26,000 to \$31,000. This house has over 3,000 square feet of space above ground. This four bedroom ranch starts at \$26,000. This story and a half model features a 24 foot bedroom. All of these houses are clad in natural cedar shakes all around, with brick or hand cut stone facades. This old fashioned colonial sells for \$29,000.0

At Williamsboro, New Jersey, we are currently at the halfway mark in construction of a 130 acre, 18 hole golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones, famed golf course architect, around which a country club community of some 300 houses, which are similar to those illustrated at Lakeridge, are now under construction on lots of approximately 10,000 to 12,000 square feet.

Ground will soon be broken for a luxurious bath and tennis club here also. This is a view of one of our ten acre private clubs that we built.

At Strathmore-at-Bel Pre we intend to build at a similar or possibly higher price range, size, quality and character as those houses that you have seen we are building in other states. With R-90 and R-150 zoning we will have the flexibility to plan lots appropriate to each house and the character of the land, and to provide, through the Density Control option so wisely conceived by the County, recreational and educational facilities for the creation of a self-contained, well planned neighborhood.

Our preliminary studies indicate that whereas density of approximately three units to the acre is permitted in the R-150 zone, we will build so the overall density does not exceed 2.2 units to the acre. Lot sizes will be mixed to fit various house and lot conditions, and to conserve trees in those wooded portions of the site.

We can state with certainty that wherever, and whenever we built for the upper income market, the rapid appreciation of value of the houses has created assessable values far in excess of the cost of providing first rate services to these areas.

The subject property is well suited to this type of development and lends itself to the well planned Strathmore Community which has been our symbol.