



Homeowners group posts win against 'BWI 2' in Lusby man's backyard

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One man's airplane hangar in the backyard isn't a problem for the Property Owners Association of Chesapeake Ranch Estates. After all, backyard hangars are fairly common in the Lusby development, which has its own runway.

But a nearly 50-foot high hangar, complete with elevated "breezeway"? Now, that's a problem.

A Calvert County Circuit Court judge decided last week that Robert A. Drefs — dubbed the "neighbor from hell" by the association's attorney — must scale back plans for his half-built hangar to comply with the association's demands.

The association sued Drefs and his wife, Karen S. Bennett, last year after residents noticed that the building was much higher than shown in the plans the association had approved.

"He decided he was going to build BWI 2," said Joseph Cunningham, whose Arlington, Va., firm represented the association's insurer.

According to the association's complaint, Drefs submitted plans for a garage, two-story hangar and ground-level "breezeway" in 2001. After reviewing the plans, which showed a peak roof height of 29 feet, the association's Architectural Review Committee gave Drefs permission to build the structure.

Drefs, who is retired, builds planes from kits and teaches others to do the same. He wants a hangar to accommodate a yet-to-be-built Lancair plane.



This January 2004 photo shows Robert A. Drefs' rancher dwarfed by a nearly completed white 'breezeway' in the back, designed to connect to a planned 43- to 48-foot high airplane hangar. Last week, a Calvert County judge ordered Drefs, described by the property owners association as the 'neighbor from hell,' to scale back his plans.

But when he started construction in 2003, what began to take shape was very different from what the association had approved.

According to the complaint, the peak height would be between 43 and 48 feet. The breezeway became an elevated "multi-story bridge structure" 24 feet off the ground, which looked like it was intended to connect the second story of the hangar to the roof of his house. Plus, there was a bay window on the second story of the hangar.

But Drefs, who represented himself, said this week that the building is really not all that different from what the Architectural Review Committee approved.

"There has been no difference in location or size of the footprint," he said. "There was a little bit more height."

He and his wife countersued the association for making them stop work on the hangar. He still maintains that the association practiced selective enforcement against him because one of the board members carries a "personal vendetta."

But last week, Judge William Krug granted the association's motion for summary judgment and ordered Drefs to come into compliance with Chesapeake Ranch Estates' codes.

Drefs compared his legal fight to the biblical battle between David and Goliath, and said the association buried him in paperwork that made the case take longer than necessary. But Corinne G. Rosen, who represented the association, said Drefs is responsible for the case dragging on. She said he conducted a 12-hour long deposition and filed a 60-page answer to the association's complaint.

"It was a case that never should have taken as long as it did, but we had a pro se individual who really enjoyed practicing law," Rosen said.

In her motion for summary judgment, Rosen wrote that the case "is about a dissembling, cunning homeowner who has attempted, through litigation, to circumvent the lawful powers of his homeowners association.

"It is about the classic 'neighbor from hell' seeking to bluster and bully his way to impose a totally inappropriate structure on his community," she wrote.

But Drefs said his neighbors really like the hangar.

"They think it'll be a definite asset to the community," he said.