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Group seeks support for study

Aim is to preserve estates that once belonged to Washington or his family

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CHARLES TOWN — Jefferson County commissioners unanimously supported an effort on Thursday that could be one of the first steps in preserving four "national treasures" by creating a park made of historic Washington family properties.

A group of concerned citizens fear development could threaten four estates that once belonged to President George Washington or members of his family, and they hope to preserve the properties with the help of the federal government and the community.

Area residents Kit McGinnis of the National Park Trust and Curt Mason from the Friends of Happy Retreat said the next step for the park project will involve seeking a federal feasibility study with the help of U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va.

If such a study is established through federal legislation, McGinnis said it would examine the acquisition, restoration and management of the historic Claymont Court Mansion, the Blakeley Mansion, Happy Retreat and Rock Hall.

McGinnis told county commissioners Thursday that having a national park that showcases the first president's heritage and impact on the young nation was an exciting prospect.

"It really is unique," McGinnis said, referring to the rich history that the Washington family has in Jefferson County. "I don't think it's been nationally recognized yet."

She said she hopes to make the family's legacy more well-known throughout the country by joining the four properties in one of three ways: by including the Washington properties in an expansion of the nearby Harpers Ferry National Historical Park; by associating the estates with a national heritage area, or by creating a new park called the Washington Family Legacy National Park.

McGinnis said the owners of the four properties have all been approached about the idea and are in favor of the federal study and the potential for saving the homes' heritage for future generations.

Commission President Frances Morgan, who began her second term as president on Thursday, said after the meeting that the Washington park effort ties in perfectly with the vision she has for the county in terms of preserving the area's history and open space while attracting heritage tourism.

"It's a wonderful initiative," Morgan said.

Mason said Thursday afternoon that the idea of trying to enlist federal help in preserving, acquiring and protecting the properties isn't entirely new.

"It's been kind of simmering for a while," he said, noting it was McGinnis, a land project manager for the National Park Trust, who approached the current property owners and made a push for a federal study. The trust is a national land conservancy.

McGinnis, who lives in Charles Town, has experience working with the Claymont Mansion, which is owned by The Claymont Society. The estate is open to the public as a retreat and education center. The Claymont Mansion was built in 1820 by Bushrod Washington, one of the president's grandnephews.

Facing Claymont is another Washington home, the Blakeley property. It now includes 115 acres, and it was also built in the 1820s by another one of the president's grandnephews, John Augustine Washington. The current owners recently listed the property for sale.

A third property involved with the park efforts is Happy Retreat, which was built in the 1780s by Charles Washington, the founder of Charles Town and the youngest brother of George Washington. The owners of Happy Retreat have agreed to give the Friends of Happy Retreat nonprofit agency the option to raise funds and purchase the property, but Mason said the group's fundraising efforts have been a bit of a challenge.

The fourth family estate was one of George Washington's own. He bought The Bullskin Plantation, now known as Rock Hall, in 1750. It was his first purchase of land in his own name, and there are 447 acres of the original 500 acres at the site.

Mason said adding three more properties into the preservation effort makes it very attractive from a potential park approach.

McGinnis said the properties by themselves are valuable, but the four of them together can create much more excitement and national interest. She plans to seek more support soon from the city councils in Charles Town, Ranson, Harpers Ferry, Bolivar and Shepherdstown.

She also hopes to meet with Byrd in coming weeks to discuss the possible federal study, which could take an average of six months to two years.

"It's sort of a first step to show that this is nationally significant," she said.

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