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A Girl Scout warehouse in Oakton prompts uproar among neighbors

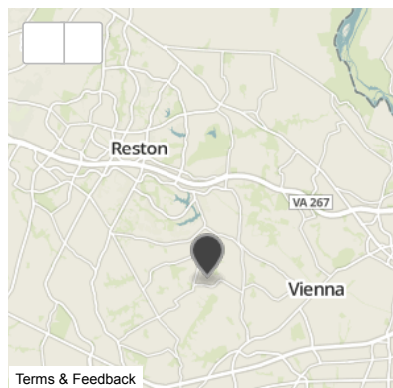


View Photo Gallery — Uproar over Girl Scout warehouse in Oakton: Residents say the proposed 6,000-square-foot facility would be an eyesore, bring more traffic and lower property values.

By Ian Shapira, Published: August 27 [E-mail the writer](#)

Fairfax County residents battling the building project in their quiet Oakton neighborhood freely acknowledge that they have a perception problem. After all, they're not fighting one of the typical suspects that spark uproars in the Washington region — Wal-Mart, acres of townhouses or a gas station with a sky-high neon sign.

The Oakton neighbors are going after [the Girl Scouts](#).



Terms & Feedback

The Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital, a nonprofit organization that serves 64,000 girls across the region and in parts of West Virginia, is asking Fairfax officials for special permission to build a [storage facility](#) on its 68-acre Camp Crowell in Oakton. The metal warehouse would be near the camp's entrance on Justin Knoll Road, whose residents contend that it would be an eyesore, add traffic and lower their property values.

The 6,000-square-foot warehouse, to be

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ringed by dozens of new trees and shrubs, would store all sorts of Scout items that troop leaders can borrow: tents, lanterns, frying pans, microscopes, tie-dye kits, memorabilia, hiking rickshaws for handicapped girls, and ice-cream sticks that are used to make photograph frames and earn merit badges.

(Alas, no cookies. They're made in Louisville.)

Lidia Soto-Harmon, the Girl Scout Council's chief executive, said she's made multiple concessions to alleviate neighbors' concerns, including changing the paint color and taking measures to minimize traffic.

"There's a piece of me that's a little sad" at the opposition the project has encountered, Soto-Harmon said. "I didn't think this was going to be as big of an issue as it turned out to be."

This being Northern Virginia, Justin Knoll Road residents have lawyered up. They've built a Web site — called "Stop Industrial Oakton" — along with a companion Facebook page. In the past year, they've met at least seven times with Girl Scout officials to argue their case against the warehouse, which will be named after the nonprofit's president, Diane Tipton. Most recently, the neighbors filed an appeal with the county zoning board, months before county supervisors will get a chance at a final say.

But as serious as the Oakton residents are in their opposition — they once refused free Girl Scout cookies at a community meeting with scout leaders — they are also self-conscious about who they're opposing.

"I love the Girl Scouts. . . . If I was a girl, I'd be a Girl Scout. I want to be very clear on this with you. It has nothing to do with the Girl Scouts," Newt Wood, 68, a semiretired office-furniture salesman who lives on Justin Knoll Road, told about 80 residents at a community meeting last week. "When we all moved here, I don't think any of us envisioned that we'd be standing here tonight talking about a 6,000-square-foot . . . prefab warehouse. It will adversely affect our daily lives and the value of our property."

After Wood gave his speech, he asked listeners to raise a hand if they were opposed to the project, and nearly every hand went up.

Soto-Harmon said the nonprofit wants to save money in the long run with a \$600,000 warehouse — built with donations — rather than spend \$50,000 a year to rent storage space.

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To appease neighbors, the warehouse will no longer have a cheaper cream-colored paint and instead will be coated in a more expensive dark brown so it blends into the woods. Also, troop leaders won't be able to drive to the warehouse and fetch what they want to borrow. Instead, to keep traffic on Justin Knoll Road at a minimum, the materials will be delivered from the warehouse to other pickup sites.

Soto-Harmon thinks the Girl Scouts deserve the benefit of the doubt from residents. "All these hundreds of kids who come in to the camp," she said, "that only benefits our society."

Camp Crowell, whose land was given to the Girl Scouts in 1948 by a board member of a Dow Chemical subsidiary, has long been a popular spot for girls from the Washington. Between June and August, more than 500 children attend one of its week-long sessions at camps with such names as Camp Mariposa and Ashgrove Adventure. The rest of the year, troops

come by on weekends to camp out, use the archery and sports fields, and play on the ropes course.

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The camp sits at the end of Justin Knoll Road, a no-outlet street that has about 10 homes, each on two-acre lots. Many more residents, who live in adjacent neighborhoods, are also against the warehouse.

The battle between the Girl Scouts and neighbors has been especially awkward because many of those neighbors once sent their daughters to Camp Crowell or served as parent troop leaders.

“This is the Girl Scouts bullying a neighborhood,” said Jack Arturo, 57, a Cisco Systems sales manager and camp neighbor whose wife once volunteered as a troop leader and whose daughter went to Camp Crowell as a Girl Scout a decade ago. “The warehouse opens up a Pandora’s box. Ideally, from the scouts’ perspective, it’d be wonderful to have a conference center there. The new facility is [much bigger] than their existing storage facility. This new warehouse could expand into something more.”

County Supervisor Michael R. Frey (R-Sully), who represents the Oakton neighborhood, said it’s been extremely rare in his 22 years in office that he’s seen a similar showdown. He cited an acrimonious fight between Centreville neighbors and the Southwestern Youth Association, which won approval in 2000 to build a sports complex of outdoor fields and indoor courts that neighbors said would spoil the rural atmosphere.

“I can understand some of the neighbors’ concerns, but I am looking at this, thinking, ‘This is the Scouts.’ It’s a not-for-profit operation. They’re not using the warehouse for bringing stock in and stock out. It’s going to store their camping equipment,” Frey said. “They’ve been paying \$50,000 a year for lease costs. That’s a lot of money that could be put into programming.”

But, as is custom in residential land disputes in high-powered Northern Virginia, arguments are quickly joined by counterarguments.

“I could take that \$600,000 they’re using to build the warehouse and stick it in an investment, hold the principal and let it generate an income stream to pay the rent for a storage facility elsewhere,” said Arturo. “But the Girl Scouts don’t want to look at that.”

Many neighbors lament that the fight has become so tense. Over the years, neighbors have called the camp to alert the managers when teenagers have sneaked onto the property late at night. Other times, the camp has plowed snow off Justin Knoll Road, free of charge.

“I still have my original Girl Scout sash from the 1960s, and I have my leader pins I got as an adult,” said Karen Wood, Newt Wood’s wife, who was talking with fellow Justin Knoll Road residents one day.

“We’re not against the Girl Scouts,” said Kathy Whitcraft.

“I love having the Girl Scouts in my back yard and love listening to them laugh. But this is a land-use issue. Now we’re going to hear trucks backing up,” Wood said. “And the warehouse is metal. God help us if it hails. It’ll sound like a machine gun going off.”

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steve1231 wrote:
8/28/2013 6:57 AM EDT

Y'know, if I wanted to build a 6000 sqft warehouse in the middle of a neighborhood, I'd be laughed out of town and told to rent space in an industrial park(like everyone else. But, because it is the Girl Scouts, they can apparently do whatever they feel like doing.



TheGrandFromage - formerly thelaw responds:
8/28/2013 7:28 AM EDT

Would you like some cheese with that, NIMBY?



asmith1 responds:
8/28/2013 7:42 AM EDT

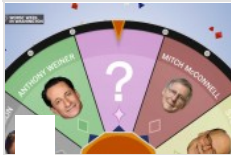
Steve - you forgot to mention that the warehouse will be on a 68 acre site OWNED by the Girl Scouts Council ... hardly in the middle of a residential area

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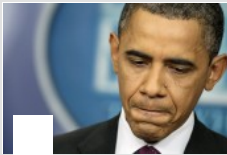
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