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## Residents urge interactivity at Josiah Henson museum

Teaching the history of the former plantation in Bethesda is a priority

by Erin Donaghue | Staff Writer

Residents said they want interactive elements, such as costumed interpreters and hands-on exhibits, at the Josiah Henson Site, formerly known as the Riley Farm or Uncle Tom's Cabin, now being adapted into a museum.

"If you live in Montgomery County, this is your heritage," Brian Woodward, a division chief for the Montgomery County Department of Parks, said at a June 15 meeting at Tilden Middle School. "You have a direct connection to what happened on Riley's Farm."

The Bethesda site and much of the neighboring Luxmanor community was once a plantation where the Rev. Josiah Henson lived and worked as a slave from 1795 to 1830. Henson's autobiographies were the basis for Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous work, "Uncle Tom's Cabin." The book, published in 1852, inspired the movement against slavery in the United States.



Tin Nguyen/The Gazette

During a tour of the Josiah Henson historic site in Bethesda, Shirl Spicer of Montgomery County Park and Planning talks about Henson, who lived and worked as a slave in the household of Issac Riley. Later in life, Henson became a preacher and an abolitionist. The site is open for Heritage Days this weekend. Read more about the events in Scene on C-1.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, which acquired the Old Georgetown Road site for \$1 million in 2006, is creating guidelines for the sites' adaptation into a museum that could open by 2012.

Henson's autobiographies detail his life as a slave on the farm, which was owned by Isaac Riley. In 1830, Henson escaped to Canada and returned to the U.S. several times, shuttling slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad. The site features a historic house that was once the home of Riley and a portion of the plantation.

Some Luxmanor residents raised concerns about visitors crossing Old Georgetown Road to access the site. "It's dangerous, and people go really fast," said Renee Sklarew. "I don't want anybody getting killed on the way over." Residents suggested an overpass, islands and longer crossing times for intersections with signals.

In developing the museum, Woodward said that planners hoped to involve the county's black and historic preservation communities and neighbors to ensure Henson's story is told accurately and the museum blends with the residential community. They also hope to coordinate the site alongside plans for the nearby White Flint area, which is expected to transform into a walkable, transit-oriented development corridor.

Based on the community's input, park staff will draft a concept plan that residents can comment on next month. The county Planning Board is expected to review the draft in the fall before voting on the park development guidelines in November. Following the adoption of the guidelines, residents can again give input during the facility planning process.