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County ends case against inspector

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County prosecutors said yesterday that they will drop trespass charges against a grading inspector accused of illegally entering a Crownsville farm 18 months ago.

"The prosecution of one inspector who responded to and went with police officers to investigate a possible illegal hazardous waste situation will further no legitimate state goal," State's Attorney Frank Weathersbee said.

William E. Watkins, a county inspector for five years, was unaware of the prosecutors' decision when a reporter contacted him late yesterday afternoon. But he said he was glad the episode is finally coming to a conclusion.

"It's been one hell of a nasty six months," Watkins said, since he was charged this February with trespassing on Francis M. Gasperich's 160-acre paulownia tree farm.

A District Court judge found Watkins, a 53-year-old Cape St. Claire resident, guilty June 10 of trespassing and fined him \$100 plus \$25 court costs. Judge Martha Rasin said Watkins, who entered the site Feb. 8, 1990, with county police to investigate complaints of illegal dumping, wrongly ignored Gasperich's No Trespassing signs.

Watkins and two police officers testified they did not see the signs. Watkins asked for a new trial in Circuit Court, which was set for Aug. 30.

"This is bizarre," Gasperich said. "There was a guilty verdict; now, because he appeals, he gets off. I would have been satisfied if a court overturned Judge Rasin's decision. I'm not satisfied with a stroke of the pen in the state's attorney's office."

Gasperich said Weathersbee is making a "political mistake" by "placing county inspectors above the law."

Prosecutors said last week that they considered dropping the case before it reached District Court. They went to trial at the request of Watkins' defense attorney, who hoped to prove his innocence.

In dropping the charges, Weathersbee noted in a news release that Watkins and the police found no hazardous waste but did find raw sewage dumped on the property. Although Gasperich had Health

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Department approval to use the sewage as fertilizer, that approval was withdrawn the next day.

"This case draws the fine line between a right to control one's own property and the public's right to assure that conditions do not exist on that property which may be detrimental to others," Weathersbee said.

Weathersbee said inspectors should not indiscriminately ignore No Trespassing signs. But such signs do not prohibit police from conducting legitimate investigations, he said. Since they only inspected Gasperich's fields, he said, they did not need a warrant.

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