

10 things to watch in 2011

The year ahead holds opportunities and challenges for western Wake County. Town and county leaders will face a number of major questions, particularly in relation to how the area allows itself to grow. The year begins with new leaders taking control in the General Assembly and will end with town elections that could change leadership at the local level.

Here are 10 story lines to watch in 2011:

GOP, Stam rise to power

Paul Stam, an Apex Republican attains a top post in this month when he returns to his seat in the N.C. House of Representatives. The District 37 representative will now take his place as the incoming House Majority Leader, thanks in large part to a GOP sweep of both chambers in the fall elections.

A looming question is whether some of Stam's favorite social causes, such as abortion limits and a ban on gay marriage, will gain traction in a year likely to be dominated by the state's expected multi-million dollar budget shortfall.

New plant key to growth

Cary, Apex and Morrisville will push toward completion of the \$327-million sewage plant that is vital to the area's future growth. Plans and approvals for the facility are nearing completion, but more questions remain unanswered as a concerted opposition emerges in New Hill, the unincorporated area of Wake County where the plant will be located.

In the coming year, the group of towns must negotiate with the Chatham County Board of Commissioners as they seek a path for a pipeline through the neighboring county. They will likely face continued resistance from residents who are wary of such a big project and one that won't give them access to the pipeline.

Tax district considered

The town of Morrisville is expected to vote on a proposal to help establish a new tax district early this year. The district could include nearly one-third of town residents.

The effort is designed to come to the aid of residents in as many as 14 subdivisions built with private roads. Some residents have asked Morrisville to convert the private roads to public roads to allow better maintenance. But because state law forbids the use of public dollars for private causes, the town will need the General Assembly's blessing to honor the request.

Growth dominates roads

By the end of the year, the 3.4-mile Triangle Parkway, North Carolina's first modern toll road, is expected to open.

It will extend the Durham Freeway (N.C. 147) south from Interstate 40 through Research Triangle Park to N.C. 540.

It's the first section of the planned Triangle Expressway, which eventually will complete the southern half of Raleigh's 540 Outer Loop as an all-toll road. The second leg, opening a year later in December 2012, will extend TriEx south to N.C. 55 at Holly Springs.

Council faces changes

The Morrisville Town Council could get a new member early this year and the entire board could change shape in the next election. One seat on the board is vacant after Councilman Tom Murry departs. Murry won a November election to the N.C. House District 41 seat.

If the council appoints a replacement, the person would serve only until the upcoming November 2011 elections.

Either way, the Morrisville Town Council could gain as many as four new members this fall when the seats held by mayor pro-tem Pete Martin and council members Linda Lyons and Liz Johnson also will be up for grabs.

Schools face decisions

A new superintendent takes the helm at Wake County schools as the system works on a still-elusive plan for assigning 143,000 children to neighborhood schools.

In addition to the budget gap, decisions on hot topics such as magnet schools and reassignment could rest on Republican member Debra Goldman of Cary, who shifted to the Democratic camp on several issues involving student assignment in 2010.

Fall elections could further complicate the board dynamic, though recent elections for Wake County's Board of Commissioners gave Democrats little indication the countywide vote will turn blue again any time soon.

To gain control, Democrats will have to hang on to the four seats they hold now, as well as wrestle one away from the GOP.

A hospital battle stirs

Health care companies have an eye on Holly Springs.

Rex Healthcare opened a new facility in the town in 2010, and Novant Health has looked at sites in Holly Springs for its own medical center.

But much of the companies' expansion plans depend on state regulators' decisions. Regulators denied Novant Health's request in 2009 to build a 41-bed hospital. But in the summer of 2010 they granted permission for the company to build three operating rooms in Holly Springs.

WakeMed, Rex Healthcare and Duke Raleigh Hospital have challenged that decision - and if a ruling in the case comes in 2011, it will reshape the medical landscape in Holly Springs.

Fuquay looks to grow

James Sauls wants people to see the town of Fuquay-Varina as more than just a quirky name.

About eight months ago, he became the town's economic development director, which puts him on the hot seat as the town seeks to grow.

The town is planning a 170-acre business park and a marketing makeover to help draw bigger investment to the area. Sauls also will implement a revolving loan fund for some small businesses and a new business incubator to help get them off the ground.

Team welcomes investor

The Carolina RailHawks are looking to enter the season with a new investor. The Cary-based Division II professional soccer team is negotiating with Traffic Sports, a sports management company that sells players, to join as a new owner.

Whether the company - which has encountered controversy in the past - becomes a majority or minority owner could help set the tone for the season as the RailHawks look to return to the title game and win a championship.

Election to alter board

The elected leadership of Cary faces a test this year as a majority of the town council face reelection.

The terms of Erv Portman, Gale Adcock, Don Frantz and Mayor Harold Weinbrecht expire in December 2011.

None of the four have announced their plans for re-election yet.

Weinbrecht faces a big challenge: no Cary mayor has won reelection since the 1990s, he said. His contest, if he draws a challenger, could serve as a referendum on how the town has weathered the economic downturn.

Staff writers Jordan Cooke, Andrew Kenney, J. Mike Blake, Bruce Siceloff, Tommy Goldsmith and John Frank contributed to this report.

carynews@nando.com or 919-460-2600