

Big projects top Apex's to-do list in 2011

Massive plan faces first test

BY JORDAN COOKE - Staff Writer

APEX In the coming year, key decisions on two major development projects in western Wake County could determine how Apex will grow.

One project, Veridea, a massive mixed-use development proposed near U.S. 1 and N.C. 55, consumed hundreds of hours this year from town staff, the Apex planning board and the town council as officials pored over the details of the project.

But a final ruling on whether Veridea will be built looms large.

The first of several decisions concerning Veridea could come as soon as Jan. 18, when the town council will consider a request from the developer, Lookout Ventures, to rezone 1,011 acres between N.C. 55, U.S. 1 and the future N.C. 540 corridor.

Veridea is expected to take 10 to 15 years to complete, perhaps longer if the economy takes a while to rebound. If successful, it could add 20,000 residents, create more than 30,000 jobs and generate an additional \$6 billion in tax revenue for the town, the developer said.

"That will dictate our workload and our patterns for growth for a good while," Mayor Keith Weatherly said in an interview.

But those homes, jobs and tax dollars are contingent upon the completion of another big project in western Wake - a proposed \$327 million wastewater treatment plant in the unincorporated community of New Hill.

The plant could be operational by 2013. But it faces opposition from New Hill residents who are expressing reservations about its size and scope. Cary, Apex and Morrisville, collectively called the Western Wake Partners, joined forces in 2004 to begin planning the Western Wake Regional Wastewater Facility.

The project is intended to help the towns comply with a state environmental mandate to return water to the Cape Fear River basin and to keep pace with the towns' rapidly growing populations.

But Apex's population has already outgrown its infrastructure.

Only about 500,000 gallons per day of wastewater treatment capacity remain at Apex's current treatment plant, and the remaining capacity has been promised to developments already in the pipeline.

Despite a contract with Raleigh that allows Apex to ship some of its untreated wastewater to the capital city, officials say the town still finds itself in a tough spot.

"We're in danger of running out [of wastewater treatment capacity]," said Tim Donnelly, the town's engineering director. "Absent the Raleigh contract, we actually have already run out. ... There could be no development of Veridea or anything else in Apex without the additional capacity to be provided by the regional plant."

Before that happens, a long list of state, county and local permits must be obtained.

The Western Wake Partners expect the permitting process to wrap up soon, opening the door for construction.

In the meantime, the partners continue to navigate legal challenges. The New Hill Community Association filed a petition in September with the state Division of Water Quality, an office of the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources. The petition seeks to strip the proposed plant site of an important water quality certificate.

The community group alleges that the department issued the certificate based on a faulty and insufficient environmental review.

The Western Wake Partners' lawyers argue that the group, and the Division of Water Quality, was thorough.

The Office of Administrative Hearings, an independent state office, will conduct the hearings for the complaint much like a trial for a lawsuit. After a discovery period, all three parties will appear before an administrative judge.

The Environmental Management Commission will uphold or refute the judge's decision, and either party can then appeal that decision to superior court. The hearing is set tentatively for the week beginning Jan. 24.

The year 2010 was a tough one for Apex from a financial standpoint. In June, the town council passed what town officials called a static budget of \$65.6 million.

That financial plan, which will carry the town through June 2011, held the line on Apex's property tax rate of 34 cents per \$100 valuation but did little else. The town council chose to dip into Apex's savings account to pay for a short list of capital projects that included replacing the town's phone system and buying the fire department two portable defibrillators.

Officials are cautiously optimistic that the new year will bring better economic news. "I don't expect any huge uptick, but I think we'll do better than our current situation," Weatherly said.

If that proves true, it could allow Apex to take a second look at some of the capital projects it put off in 2010, added Councilman Lance Olive.

"I've got some things I would like us to do that have been deferred, like a few sidewalk projects and some parks projects," he said. "Those are the kinds of things that I hope will bubble up a little higher on our priority list."

That could include plans for the Environmental Education and Nature Park to be located on Apex Barbecue Road. Construction of the park could begin in 2011 if Apex is able to sell off bonds to help cover the cost.