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## Corps backs New Hill waste plant

**CARY** -- Four western Wake County towns are a step closer to building a \$327 million regional wastewater treatment plant in New Hill, an unincorporated community that has fought the plant for years.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released its final environmental approval for the site Thursday. The 85-page document endorses the site as the one that will have the smallest negative environmental impact, despite being near wetlands.

"We're very happy to have reached this milestone," Cary Mayor Harold Weinbrecht said. "But there's more to go."

The towns - Cary, Apex, Morrisville and Holly Springs - formed Western Wake Partners in 2004 to begin planning the facility. The project was intended to help the towns comply with a state environmental mandate, directed at Cary, Apex and Morrisville, to return water to the Cape Fear River basin and to keep pace with the towns' rapidly-growing populations.

Opposition from New Hill residents has helped delay the project for more than three years. Those residents had hoped to persuade regulators to strike down the New Hill site, contending that it unnecessarily burdens the mostly minority, low-income residents at this crossroads near the Shearon Harris Nuclear power plant.

On Thursday, residents vowed to continue the fight, perhaps in court.

"We're disappointed, but we're not surprised with the decision," said Paul Barth, president of the New Hill Community Association. "It doesn't mean that we will give in to the decision. We will continue to work through our options, which will include litigation if necessary."

Barth declined to discuss the legal strategy. He said the group may also appeal "environmental justice issues" through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, but will first review the Army Corps decision.

"Until the concrete is poured, we're not going to quit," Barth said.

The four towns now will seek several state permits for the project covering aspects such as transportation, air quality and construction. If approved quickly, the plant could be built by the end of 2013, said Steve Brown, director of Cary's department of public works and utilities.

Apex Mayor Keith Weatherly was happy about the decision, but not the opposition.

"It's unfortunate that there's been some ill will, but I think the appropriate decision has been made in this case," Weatherly said. "The Army Corps of Engineers has left no stone unturned to investigate the concerns of the residents down there. ... Everybody obviously could not be satisfied with the outcome, but I think everybody should at least be satisfied with the process."

Apex, Morrisville and Cary officials, meanwhile, are paying attention to Holly Springs' next move.

Unlike its partners, Holly Springs already returns its treated sewage to the Cape Fear River basin, in Harris Lake, and is a voluntary member of the Western Wake Partners. Separately, the town has been pursuing an alternative to the New Hill plant, hoping to gain state approval to put additional treated wastewater into Harris Lake. That plan would save the town money and may allow it to avoid the legal fight over the New Hill plant.

The town can back out of its contract with the Western Wake Partners before the plant is permitted for construction, which Brown estimates could take about six months. Even though the Harris Lake option is not a sure bet for Holly Springs, the town will continue to fund an environmental study to submit to the state in support of it.

"I think the schedules are still compatible to pursue both of our alternatives," said Holly Springs director of engineering Stephanie Sudano.

Staff writer Jack Hagel contributed to this report.

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