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DENR requests more data on sewage plant site

By [Shawn Daley](#) Editor

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New Hill residents have been feeling ignored ever since they discovered last year that the Western Wake Partners were planning to build a regional sewage plant in the middle of their community.

But it seems someone has finally listened to their objections.

The N.C. Department of Environmental and Natural Resources recently issued a report that requires the project partners to provide more detailed and accurate information concerning the site selection process.

DENR's request follows a June 15 public hearing that was held to gain public feedback on the project partner's draft environmental impact study concerning the proposed sewage plant.

More than 30 people spoke out against the plant at the hearing while over 100 wrote DENR about their concerns, which included such topics as pipeline leakage and spills,

lack of public input into the process, flawed calculations, and the plant's proximity to churches and historic sites.

The site is also located within an area of New Hill that is mostly African-American.

Another factor that didn't help the project partner's cause was Cary's 7.9 million-gallon sewage spill into Swift Creek in June.

The concerns raised by New Hill residents were practically echoed by DENR hearing officers Linda Culpepper and Jill Pafford in their report.

It was a fact not overlooked by New Hill Community Association President Paul Barth.

"I'm hesitant to call this a home run because we would have preferred if they said the chosen site was inappropriate," said Barth. "But we were very encouraged by what we read. It showed that DENR took this matter very seriously.

"This certainly makes us feel good but it's disappointing that it took a year for someone to listen to us. Now the partners will have to use facts instead of using their spin and half-truths. I'd call that a major victory."

The final paragraph of the DENR report addressed the project partners of Cary, Apex, Holly Springs and Morrisville by stating, "After hearing oral comments, reading written comments and consulting with technical experts in DENR, it is our recommendation that you do not consider the April 2006 Draft EIS as an accurate,

complete and adequate document."

Cary Town Manager Bill Coleman said he was confident the towns could provide the proper documentation to satisfy DENR.

"Something like this really isn't out of the ordinary," said Coleman. "They are looking for more information and I don't see any major significance in it."

Apex Mayor Keith Weatherly was also unfazed by DENR's request.

"It's all part of the process," said Weatherly. "The (public) got to weigh in and DENR is obligated to take those concerns seriously. Now the ball is in our court."

Weatherly said he still fully supports the decision to build the plant just off old U.S. 1 in New Hill and is confident the project will move forward.

"I represent the taxpayers of Apex and this is the best deal for us," said Weatherly. "Our staff recommends this site and they have no ulterior motive except to do what is best for the town."

Apex councilman Bill Sutton, a vocal critic of the site selection process, said he was "pleasantly surprised" by the DENR report.

"Short range, it could benefit the taxpayers," said Sutton. "But long range it could hurt. New Hill is close to Apex and it's an area that will be developed. They want to put a sewage plant in area that could eventually be a

commercial node.

"But I don't look at it that way. I'm looking at it as either being wrong or right and I don't think it's right to do that to another community. I don't believe the people of Apex want to be perceived as bullies in their own neighborhood. I think you'd find that out if you put it to a referendum and let the residents vote on it."

Another critic of the site selection, Apex councilman Bill Jensen, said he thinks the project partners will now be forced to look for a different site.

"I think DENR pointed out very clearly that the site selection process was flawed," said Jensen. "I think (the partners) will have difficulty responding in a manner that will save this site."

Neither Weatherly or Coleman knew the timetable for a response to DENR but both agreed that the project partners needed to act quickly to keep the project moving forward.

New Hill residents, meanwhile, believe the tide has finally turned in their favor.

"We believe we will prevail because we have right on our side," said Barth. "We've been fighting, scratching and clawing over this for a long time and we aren't going to go away."

To read the full report visit www.westernwakepartners.org. or www.newhillca.org.