

Masthead



[News - Holly Springs](#)

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## Holly Springs backs out of New Hill plan

### Cary, Morrisville and Apex will move ahead with sewage plant.

BY ANDREW KENNEY - Staff Writer

Holly Springs officials have new plans for the town's wastewater.

Council members voted last week to withdraw from Western Wake Partners, the coalition of Holly Springs, Apex, Morrisville and Cary to build a sewage facility in New Hill.

Holly Springs, which was to have had a limited stake in the wastewater treatment plant, could save \$30 to \$40 million - more than the town's entire annual operating budget - by setting out alone, Mayor Dick Sears said Monday.

"This is something we've been contemplating for a long time," Sears said. "It's not really something that transpired for any particular change in events at the wastewater treatment plant."

With its own newly expanded plant, Holly Springs never needed to treat its water in New Hill. Instead, the town would have used the Western Wake Partners' plant and pipes as a route to the Cape Fear River for water that it had already processed.

"Right now we're in good shape and will be for quite some time without doing anything," Sears said.

Cary, Apex, Morrisville and Holly Springs formed the Western Wake Partners in 2004 to begin planning the \$327 million facility.

The project was intended to help the towns comply with a state environmental mandate, directed at Cary, Apex and Morrisville - and only suggested to Holly Springs - to return water to the Cape Fear River basin and to keep pace with the towns' rapidly-growing populations.

Sears said the town is examining its alternatives.

Its plant can treat 6 million gallons per day, or about quadruple the town's current wastewater needs.

But Holly Springs is only permitted to dispose of 2.4 million gallons of treated wastewater per day - most goes to Harris Lake, and some is reclaimed for irrigation.

The town is awaiting state permission to send 3.6 million more gallons per day of its treated wastewater to Harris Lake via Utley Creek.

This month, a firm hired by the town reported that cutting off that flow would harm the ecosystem in Utley Creek.

Carolina Ecosystems performed the research as part of the town's application to pump more treated water to the creek.

"That's the beginning of a long and complicated process," said Stephanie Sudano, the town's director of engineering.

Breaking away from the partnership may indicate that the town is optimistic about that application.

"We've heard nothing official yet, but our opinion is that this remains a distinct possibility," Sears said.

The partnership

Each partner town is allowed to walk away from the contract before the project won final construction approval. But to leave, Holly Springs town will have to pay to redesign the plans for the New Hill plant, and for its share of the planning, engineering and permitting costs.

"We don't know exactly what the redesign cost will be at this point," Sears said. "It will be

significant, but it won't be \$40 million."

Under the old plan, the town would have built a \$35 million, seven-mile pipeline to the New Hill plant.

But if the town is allowed to send more water to Utleigh Creek, Holly Springs could instead expand its capacity with just \$10 million of modifications, Sudano said in July.

The towns' attorneys will figure out who owes whom what, Sears said.

Cary Mayor Harold Weinbrecht was unsure the numbers would favor Holly Springs. "It may in fact be cost-prohibitive," he said of the break. "I don't think they'll see a financial benefit to this."

Keith Weatherly, the mayor of Apex, said that the Holly Springs decision wouldn't have too deep an impact on the other partners. "They just wanted to connect their existing facilities to our outfall line," he said on Monday.

#### Plant opposition

Construction on the New Hill plant is scheduled to wrap up in 2013, but the project faces hurdles.

This month, a petition was filed on behalf of the crossroads community of New Hill. It seeks to block construction of the plant and could take months to resolve.

The petition charges that the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources issued a water quality certificate to the Western Wake Partners based on insufficient information.

Plus, Chatham County commissioners are trying to decide whether to allow a pipeline from the plant to cross through their county.

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