

Masthead



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Tuesday, Jul. 13, 2010

Holly Springs weighs water options

The town needs state approval to pursue a money-saving wastewater management plan.

BY TED RICHARDSON - STAFF WRITER

Timing is everything as Holly Springs officials work to save millions of dollars.

The town plans to seek state permission to send more treated wastewater to Harris Lake. If approval is granted quickly, Holly Springs could back out of a partnership with other western Wake County towns that are planning a wastewater treatment facility. Breaking away could save Holly Springs up to \$25 million - a sum that exceeds the town's annual operating budget. If the request is denied - or if approval takes too much time - the town would remain a partner and contribute to the plant's construction costs.

The other partners in the project - the towns of Cary, Apex and Morrisville - are watching for Holly Springs' next move. "The ball's in their court," Cary Mayor Harold Weinbrecht said.

It's the latest chapter in the tale of this growing region's expanding infrastructure.

In 2005, Holly Springs joined forces with Cary, Apex and Morrisville. The towns, who together are called the Western Wake Partnership, sought to ensure that wastewater treatment facilities kept pace with the region's rapidly growing population. The partners also were complying with a state environmental mandate - directed at Cary, Apex, and Morrisville, but only suggested for Holly Springs - to return water to the Cape Fear River Basin.

The towns hope to build a \$300 million wastewater plant in New Hill, an unincorporated community in southwestern Wake. The plant would treat wastewater from Cary, Apex, Morrisville and the southern portion of Research Triangle Park. Holly Springs, meanwhile, expects to pay \$35 million for a pipeline that would allow wastewater, already treated in the town's plant, to hitch a ride to the Cape Fear River.

But the New Hill project has been held up by environmental studies and opposition from residents who want the plant built elsewhere. The project was initially to be completed by 2011. Steve Brown, Cary's director of public works and utilities, said he expects the plant to be operational by the end of 2013.

Because Holly Springs isn't mandated to send treated wastewater to the Cape Fear River Basin, it has a little more flexibility than the other towns in the partnership.

And, in part because of the New Hill delay, the town is considering a cheaper alternative - one that could end its association with the regional plant and save Holly Springs residents \$25 million.

Instead of building a seven-mile pipeline to that proposed plant, Holly Springs might be able to use a 2.5-mile pipe - and gravity, free of charge - to move treated wastewater to Harris Lake. Holly Springs was already cleared to put 2.4 million gallons of treated wastewater per day to Harris Lake, but the town may eventually need to find a home for up to 6 million gallons per day. A recent wastewater plant expansion in Holly Springs grants the town that capacity - 24 times more wastewater than Holly Springs could treat in 1985, when it first got sewer service, and more than twice what it could treat in 2009.

Adjusting Holly Springs' plant to accommodate more flow to Harris Lake could cost about \$10 million, said Stephanie Sudano, the town's director of engineering.

But to go the cheaper route, Holly Springs needs environmental approval to discharge more treated wastewater to Harris Lake - before the New Hill plant is approved for construction.

"There is a time drama here," Holly Springs town manager Carl Dean said.

Henry Wicker, a project manager with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, says final environmental clearance for the New Hill site could be published this month. That approval would allow the state permitting process to begin, which would in turn allow the Western Wake Partners to begin with construction of the wastewater facility.

Holly Springs, meanwhile, paid a private firm \$64,000 to conduct an environmental assessment regarding increased discharge to Harris Lake. "They're finalizing the document," Sudano said. "Then we have to submit for state approval."

At a July 6 town meeting, Holly Springs approved an engineering assessment to see how much they'll owe for engineering adjustments to the regional plant should they back out of the partnership. "We have the right to withdraw prior to the point when authorization to construct the regional plant is issued by the state," said John Schifano, Holly Springs' town attorney.

If the town chooses to withdraw from the partnership, it would still have to pay for adjustments to an effluent pipeline and pump station designed to move its treated wastewater from the regional site to the Cape Fear River. Holly Springs also would owe the partnership its share of the planning, engineering and permitting costs.

Apex town manager Bruce Radford says he would like to see Holly Springs stay in the partnership. "Obviously, they have to do what's best for their community," Radford said. "And we respect that."

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