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Mayors brush off Apex request to consider alternate sewer plant site

By ADAM ARNOLD, STAFF WRITER

Apex commissioners' calling for re-evaluation of a regional sewer plant site is getting a cool reception from their western Wake County partners. Four towns — Apex, Cary, Holly Springs and Morrisville, known as the Western Wake Partners — have joined together to build the plant.

Cary, the lead agency in the project, condemned a 212-acre tract in New Hill in August over the vocal and continuing protests of area residents. The site selection is supposed to be based on a unanimous vote of the partners.

Apex commissioners, however, now want the partners' policy advisory committee to consider another nearby site that would be about a mile west of the current location and not across the street from a historic church. "I want them to do it officially as the Western Wake Partners," said Apex Commissioner Mike Jones, who authored the resolution.

Mayors of the other communities say the location Apex wants has been considered.

Cary Mayor Ernie McAlister said officials from all four towns discussed the site in September. That meeting took place before the mayors had convened as the policy advisory committee.

"We put it through the paces," McAlister said. "It did not score as highly as the site we have chosen and taken possession of. It was clear we were on the right site."

Cary and Apex have an agreement with the state from 2001 to start returning water to the Cape Fear River basin, currently discharged into the Neuse River basin, by Jan. 1, 2011.

Work on plant siting has been under way for several years.

Discussion of the condemnation, which started in late spring, generated staunch opposition from New Hill residents who do not want the plant in their community.

The site is across Old U.S. 1 from historic New Hill Baptist Church. Several New Hill residents thanked the board for the resolution during a public comment period afterward and said they had felt unheard, as no action had been taken to address their site concerns.

"Someone has to be the first," said New Hill resident Bill Ott to the commissioners.

Other mayors backed up McAlister.

"From all the data we could look at and find, the current site still has the highest ranking," said Holly Springs Mayor Dick Sears.

"All of the additional sites have been studied all we need to," said Morrisville Mayor Jan Faulkner. "It's already been considered."

The next step, McAlister said, will be to write back to the Apex Board of Commissioners to "say 'we've

done that — we've looked."

Another possible complication is that Apex's original notification that the New Hill site was acceptable appears not to have been done in compliance with the town's ordinances or the agreement among the towns covering the plant.

According to Apex's charter, the mayor shall sign all contracts, franchises and other written instruments authorized by the board. The interlocal agreement requires the site selection to be based on the unanimous vote of the partner towns.

In June, Apex Mayor Keith Weatherly sent a letter to McAlister saying that Apex agreed with the site selection. However, the board never signed off on the site selection.

Weatherly said last week that he sent the letter on the recommendation of town staff.

All five commissioners favored at least one version of the resolution. Bill Jensen and Bill Sutton, who had provided their own variations, voted against the final draft. Jones, Bryan Gossage and Gene Schulze supported it.

Weatherly, who does not vote, said the board's effort was "an exercise in futility," since no consideration of changes in the plant site would occur without the rest of the towns supporting it.

"Let's be honest here," Weatherly said. "What we have here is an exercise in grandstanding."

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