

New Hill Community Association: Speaking truth to power

by [Rebekah L. Cowell](#)



Five years ago, New Hill, a rural community in western Wake County, was primarily known only by its residents, along with weekend boaters, cyclists and travelers who had taken a wrong turn off U.S. 64.

Yet the historically African-American town was also known to the Western Wake Partners, an alliance of Cary, Apex, Morrisville, Research Triangle Park-South and, until this September, Holly Springs, which plans to build a \$327 million wastewater treatment plant in the center of town. The plant will loom across the street from the New Hill First Baptist Church and playground, within 1,000 feet of 23 homes and a half-mile from the First Baptist Church of New Hill.

What the Western Wake Partners didn't count on was the strength of their opponent, the 280-member [New Hill Community Association](#), which has united black and white residents to fight the plant.

"When I was growing up, my grandmother told me that if you took a pencil you could break it easily," says NCHA President Paul Barth, "but if you put 10 or more together it would be more difficult and impossible to break."

The Rev. James Clanton, pastor of First Baptist Church New Hill, has led the African-American community. Although Clanton lives in Garner, his church and congregation will be affected by the plant, which, due to break ground this year, will be built near the church's historical cemetery.

"Here at New Hill, everybody understands that the smell from a sewage plant is no respecter of race," he says.

"The fact our spiritual leader embraced the association and got involved so early let us know as a church this is a good thing, and a fight for us," says Elaine Joyner, who grew up in a small house behind the First Baptist New Hill church.

The Wake County Commissioners, who would ostensibly represent New Hill's constituents, have been largely absent from the conflict. Without their elected officials, the NHCA realized it would have to fight the partners alone. For many New Hill residents, this was their first foray into politics and activism.

"I wasn't politically inclined at that time," Barth says. "Before the sewage plant I couldn't have told you who our commissioners were."

Neighbors gathered over a series of meetings and painstakingly prepared for a public hearing held by the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

"When we realized we would have to go to the state level to be heard, we focused on any documents supporting the plant submitted to the state, and we just tore them apart and questioned everything," Barth recalls.

The NCHA also had help from David Bristol, acting dean and associate dean for academic affairs at N.C. State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. Bristol, who has lived in New Hill since 1986, says he found EPA regulations online that suggested the partners either hadn't considered environmental justice regulations or had selectively defined the boundaries of New Hill to exclude African-Americans. "It seemed pretty clear to me that the Western Wake Partners either hadn't considered the ... impact of their plant on African-Americans," Bristol says, "or had intentionally tried to hide it by using the census node they selected to try and 'dilute' the African-American population."

So Barth conducted a door-to-door survey of the individuals living in the census area of Site 14, the proposed plant location: 87 percent of those directly impacted are African-American.

Last year, the NCHA approached Chris Brook, attorney for the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, and asked him to take their case. "They had a well put-together narrative and had done all the groundwork," said Brook, "and within an hour and half of meeting with them I had a pretty good idea of what had happened since 2005."

The coalition took the case, and Brook has grown close to the NCHA leaders. "Our legal and organizing assistance would have meant nothing without the New Hill Community Association," Brook says. "Rallying around a common purpose, they have shown people power can match even the largest and wealthiest of opponents. Their passion inspires me on a daily basis."

The NCHA still faces significant challenges. Earlier this fall, in an attempt to stop the plant, it filed a Petition for Contested Case Hearing, which asks that a neutral third party review the partners' actions and make a final ruling. The petition also contests N.C. DENR's issuance of a Clean Water Act permit for the facility and contends the site "has larger human and environmental justice impacts than other, more suitable alternatives ..."

Litigation will be expensive, and thus far the community has been able to pay those costs with proceeds from barbecue fundraisers and a \$10,000 grant from the Impact Fund, a nonprofit organization based in Berkeley, Calif., that financially assists community groups in the areas of civil rights, environmental justice and poverty law.

In two weeks, the NHCA and Brook will meet for mediation with N.C. DENR attorneys; the petition is scheduled to go before the state Office of Administrative Hearings in January.

"No one can say that the people of New Hill are not trying to be a force of positive ideas and positive solutions in the community," Clanton says.

To learn more about the history of New Hill, seek out Remembering New Hill, N.C.— Oral Histories by Judy Tysmans, which was published this year with funding by a grant from the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

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