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New Hill showdown

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A water reclamation facility, by any other name, would smell like a sewage plant to the 1,000 or so people who live in the rural southwestern Wake County community of **New Hill**. Not surprisingly, most of them want nothing to do with any such "facility" anywhere near their homes.

That's what official Cary has learned since mailing notices in mid-May about the selection of a site off U.S. 1 for a sewage plant serving Cary, Apex, Holly Springs and Morrisville. **New Hill** folks are entitled to their opinion and deserve a full hearing.

The four towns (Cary in fact is the state's seventh-largest city) make up the western Wake growth belt, where **new** subdivisions have mushroomed to take advantage of a central regional location and proximity to Research Triangle Park. Water and sewer service must expand accordingly. And it makes sense to provide additional wastewater treatment capacity with one large, efficient plant.

The state, which must approve the project, appropriately wants the towns to keep treated wastewater in the Cape Fear River basin downstream from Jordan Lake instead of putting it into the stressed-out Neuse River tributaries where effluent now is sent. The regulators have set a 2011 deadline to make the switch.

Town officials say that to meet the deadline on a 3 1/2-year building project, they need to work simultaneously on the plant design and the environmental approvals. The latter process includes opportunity for public comment from anybody with an interest in the plant, including **New Hill** residents. The state is expected to schedule those hearings for the fall.

Cary, which is taking the lead in the plant's construction and operation, is still negotiating over purchase of the site -- which, at 200 acres, would allow for a deep wooded buffer around the plant itself. The Cary Town Council, in a split vote on June 23, approved condemnation of the land if necessary.

That vote alienated the **New Hill** neighbors, who had had only a few weeks to mount an opposition. Yet the hearings on the plant's environmental permit offer opponents another chance to make their case -- and that's as it should be.

Then, it will be up to the state to fairly weigh the plant's positives of pollution control and cost efficiencies against the fears of odors and traffic, among many other considerations. The state can't be blamed for wanting the towns to proceed on the project with a sense of urgency, but it's also important that a decision on where to put a sewage plant of this size is made only with full public involvement and all site options carefully explored.

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