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New Hill group continues fight against plant  
Planners allege 'delay tactic'

BY ANDREW KENNEY, Staff Writer

New Hill residents continue to press against the sewage treatment plant planned for their community.

With the help of pro-bono lawyers, members of the New Hill Community Association made pinpoint arguments last week at a Division of Water Quality public hearing regarding the \$327 million facility.

The project will serve Cary, Apex and Morrisville - collectively known as the Western Wake Partners - who must comply with a state environmental mandate to return treated wastewater to the Cape Fear River basin.

The plant also is expected to help the



Bob Kelly, an at-large representative of the New Hill Community Association, and Paul Barth, its president, talk with Paul Rawls and Jim McKay of the N.C. Division of Water Quality at a Sept. 28 meeting.

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#### Background

In 2004, Cary, Apex and Morrisville formed the Western Wake Partners to plan a regional wastewater treatment facility. The towns were complying with a state mandate to begin returning treated wastewater to the Cape Fear River basin. In 2005, the towns approved the New Hill site. A year later, New Hill residents take the site decision to court.

In July, the Army Corps of Engineers gave final environmental approval for the site. Construction is scheduled to wrap up in 2013.

In September, the New Hill Community Association filed a petition to block construction of the plant.

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Many of the New Hill association's 300-plus members are fighting what they see as an unwanted incursion into their rural life, said its president, Paul Barth.

But at the public hearing last week, the group's members said little of the overarching conflict, or their opposition to the project. Instead, the group and its lawyers tailored their message for the meeting, which was meant to gather comment about a water discharge permit for the proposed plant.

The permit would allow the plant's operators to discharge water into the Cape Fear River in Chatham County, just below Buckhorn Dam.

The New Hill group, and its lawyers, argued that the authorities hadn't properly considered the flow's impact on aquatic

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life and recreation.

They said, too, that a possible expansion of the Shearon Harris nuclear complex in southwestern Wake County could have the power plant drawing water out of the river and right back through New Hill.

The group split a well tuned - and well timed - message into chunks and spread it across eight New Hill residents and an intern and two attorneys from the Southern Coalition for Social Justice.

Their goal was to sway Gil Vinzani, a state Department of Environment and Natural Resources official. Vinzani will consider the comments and make his own recommendation about the permit to the director of the Division of Water Quality.

If the division denies the permit, the Western Wake Partners would have to choose a new discharge site.

The plant itself, however, would likely stay at Site 14 - a location that the New Hill Community Association dislikes - said Apex Mayor Keith Weatherly.

He said the debate was a delaying tactic.

"They're looking for any kind of obstacle that they can throw in," Weatherly said in an interview. "If there's not a permit issued ... it will just prolong the process."

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Barth said that was not his objective.

"If it's inevitable, why would I do that?" he said.

Barth believes now, after five years of fighting, that the sewage plant is coming to New Hill.

Last week's meeting might have been one of a few last chances for his group to influence the Western Wake Partners' plans.

But he still hopes that the Partners might choose a location farther from the center of New Hill.

If the plant is forced to discharge to Harris Lake instead of the Cape Fear River, the plant's planners might make that move, Barth said.

Weatherly said that the Partners had already investigated the alternative options, including Harris and Jordan lakes, properly.

Other voices

Some spoke in favor of the project, too.

"It's the right thing to do for our communities," said Jewel Morris, who said she owns land in New Hill. "This facility is critical to our economic viability."

Nelly Evans, a New Hill resident, said the project would help rejuvenate the area.

A former Chatham County commissioner highlighted another obstacle for the project. The Western Wake Partners need Chatham County commissioners to approve 8.1 miles of pipeline that will carry water through Chatham to the river.

Chatham commissioner George Lucier said his board could take up to two more months to weigh the request. "We understand the sense of urgency," Lucier said at the hearing last week. "We really

have to wait until our concerns are met."

The board wants answers from its staff and the Partners about the pipes' effect on Chatham citizens and the water quality in Jordan Lake.

"We need to be confident that this pipeline will in fact serve the interest of our citizens," Lucier said in an interview.

The board might talk about the pipes during its next three meetings, he said.

Lucier's constituents include at least a few enemies of the project.

Former Chatham commissioner Patrick Barnes and his group, Chatham United, are devoted to pushing back perceived expansion and incursions from Wake County.

"This is a grassroots effort that was started in 2004 for one sole purpose on earth: that's to fight Cary and the Western Wake Partnership," he said at last week's meeting.

Barnes, of the New Hill Community Association, said his group has branched out and cooperates with allies like Chatham United.

"I'm not going to quit until the concrete's poured," he said in an interview. "The good thing about it being delayed is that it's given us more opportunity to find different things that are wrong and different avenues to pursue."

Weatherly said the project landed on his desk in the 1990s, when he was a freshly minted mayor.

Finally, he said last week, the two-year-delayed plant seemed to be nearing its finish - or the beginning of construction, at least.

If hurdles are cleared quickly, construction on the New Hill plant could wrap up in 2013.

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