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Published Sat, Jan 29, 2011 02:00 AM

Modified Sat, Jan 29, 2011 12:15 AM

New Hill group greenlights wastewater plant after accord

NEW HILL -- A community group has ended its efforts to block a \$327 million sewage treatment plant in a rural part of southwestern Wake County, ending years of opposition that has delayed the project.

Under an agreement signed this week, the New Hill Community Association will drop the legal challenge it mounted against a key permit for the plant. The group's officers also will end their public opposition and encourage their members to do the same.

In exchange, the Western Wake Partners - the towns of Apex, Cary and Morrisville - promised \$500,000 for a new community center and agreed to build two bus shelters for schoolchildren in New Hill, among other concessions.

"It's the cost of moving ahead," said Keith Weatherly, mayor of Apex and chairman of the Western Wake Partners policy advisory committee. "Going through the whole legal process would have been time-consuming, though there's no question we would have prevailed. We were just eager to move ahead."

The three towns say the plant is necessary to allow them to continue to grow and to comply with a state environmental mandate to return treated wastewater to the Cape Fear River basin, where they draw their drinking water.

New Hill residents first banded together to fight the plant almost six years ago.

"In the early days, of course, we were still trying to change the state's mind about the plant location," said Paul Barth, president of the New Hill Community Association. But now "we've reached about the best we can do."

The agreement does not forbid residents of the unincorporated community from fighting the partners' efforts to acquire land for the project.

The wastewater project had already been delayed five years when the New Hill community group and the Southern Coalition for Social Justice challenged a state environmental permit in September.

The state Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the three towns and the community association met for mandatory mediation sessions before the case went to court. The three parties came to the compromise during two meetings in December.

"There's relief - some sadness but also some relief," Barth said.

Thursday night, he urged members of his association to take down their protest signs.

The community center will be a new focal point for the hundreds of neighbors who coalesced around protests against the sewage plant, he said. The community group also won changes in the plant's lighting and acoustic insulation as well as water and sewer connections for some people.

The Western Wake Partners, meanwhile, still must secure the path of an 8.1-mile pipeline that will run from the plant through Chatham County and into the Cape Fear River.

Chatham County board members last year wanted conditions met before they allowed the pipe to cross their turf. A new majority joined the board early this year. The reconfigured board will have its first public discussion of the pipeline on Feb. 7.

The plant also awaits final review and approval by the state, said Stephen Brown, public works director for Cary.

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