

Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2011

Officials weigh pipeline options

Wake leaders press Chatham

BY TED RICHARDSON - STAFF WRITER

MONCURE The mayors of Apex, Cary and Morrisville and a host of business and government leaders from across the Triangle applied a full-court press at one end of a rural school gym in Moncure last week, trying to convince Chatham County leaders that the demands of growth in Wake County warrant acquisition of an 8-mile-long, 40-foot-wide swath of land.

The approval for a wastewater pipeline to the Cape Fear River, the last major hurdle for the construction of a regional sewage plant, now rests on the shoulders of the Chatham Board of Commissioners, three of whom are newly elected.

The board could take action on the proposal as early as next week.

To acquire the pipeline easement, the Western Wake Partners, led by the town of Cary, would either lease private land from 12 Chatham landowners along the pipeline route, or, barring a settlement with landowners, seize the land through eminent domain.

The three mayors sat just inside the gym's foul line looking at the commissioners at a table under the basketball hoop. Nearly 150 people covered half the court behind them at the meeting at Moncure School in Chatham County.

Cary Mayor Harold Weinbrecht spoke first and noted that the wastewater project was mandated by the state. He said that it will foster regional growth and create jobs.

Morrisville Mayor Jackie Holcombe followed. "Your support of these necessary easements is critical," she said. "Certainly for my Morrisville community and for the other partner communities."

Key development in several western Wake towns - including Veridea, a 1,000-acre development in Apex that could double the town's tax base - will stall without added wastewater treatment capacity.

Before the meeting began, two Chatham County residents - the only ones not in suits on the front row - argued about whether their land should be sold to help those growing towns to the east.

"I'm not opposed to it," said James Pollard.

The pipeline easement would cross right in front of his home along Christian Chapel Church Road.

"I think they'll treat us fairly," Pollard said. "I think they'll offer the right price."

Jack Tilley, sitting next to Pollard, did not agree.

"They'll just take over all the land," he said. "I don't want to have nothing to do with them."

The Chatham board is led by new chairman Brian Bock, who during his campaign stated that his top priority was job growth. Further down the list was Bock's goal to aggressively protect private property rights.

Just a few weeks into his tenure, Bock and his fellow commissioners are caught squarely between these issues.

"It's going to be a tough decision," said Commissioner Pam Stewart, another new addition to the board. "Any way we go, it's going to affect a lot of people."

Pittsboro resident Esther Cohen, who opposes the plant, drew the loudest applause when she reminded the commissioners that most of those who had spoken weren't from Chatham County. "Listen to us. We live here," she said.

Roughly equal numbers of speakers supported and opposed the pipeline. Others suggested some sort of compromise.

New Hill, the crossroads community just a few miles up U.S. 1 where the sewage plant will likely be built, reached a compromise with the Western Wake Partners last month.

The partners offered to pay \$500,000 toward a community center and bus shelters in New Hill and cover water and sewage connection fees for residents living near the plant to end New Hill's years-long opposition.

Chatham resident Tim Jeffers suggested, in return for getting the pipeline easements, the partners could help the nearby town of Moncure complete a \$200,000 youth center.

"If you say yes, it better cost them," said Chatham resident Robert Sears. "Because this is the best leverage you'll ever have."

Other Chatham residents wanted assurance, through state legislation, that Wake towns would not further annex into their county without consent from Chatham leaders.

Such deals could take time, but the Western Wake Partners say the clock is ticking.

"We need the project to proceed," said Keith Weatherly, mayor of Apex and chairman of the Western Wake Partners advisory committee.

But Chatham resident Sam Cherry told commissioners to take their time.

"They're here to try to press the timeline," he said. "But you can ask for an extension."

It's still not clear what the Chatham board will decide.

The former board, two of whom remain on council, recommended in November that the new board not approve the pipeline.

But new members seem more willing to compromise.

"This pipeline has to go in," Stewart said. "I just want both parties to be able to walk away and not think the worst thing just happened."

After the meeting drew to a close, Weatherly pulled Bock aside and the two chatted privately in a school hallway outside the gym. Weinbrecht soon joined them.

Bock said a decision will come soon.

"I think we have enough information," he said.

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