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Public input sought on New Hill project

By Matt Saldaña

Citizens have less than two weeks to comment on a draft Environmental Impact Statement on a controversial wastewater treatment plant proposed for New Hill, a primarily African-American community in unincorporated western Wake County.

"Why did they choose this site? When I get up in the morning and I look at myself in the mirror, I know why they chose it," said Louis Powell, an African-American resident of New Hill.

The controversial \$327 million project has a long history. The towns of Cary, Apex, Morrisville and Holly Springs, and the Wake County portion of Research Triangle Park, have formed an alliance, Western Wake Partners, to determine the best site for a sewage treatment plant. In 2006, they issued an environmental impact statement determining the unincorporated town of New Hill was the best place to flush their waste—despite reasonable alternatives in other underpopulated areas near the Shearon Harris nuclear plant.

However, that EIS elicited massive citizen outcry as well as skepticism from state regulators because of incomplete data and a lack of public input. N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources officials wrote that the report should not be considered an "accurate, complete and adequate document" because it "does not appropriately evaluate the population directly impacted" in New Hill.

So in 2007, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers took on the report, so that it would comply fully with state and federal environmental laws.

Yet, the Corps' draft EIS, written by a team of consultants hired by Western Wake Partners, has arrived at many of the same conclusions as the Partners' original EIS. Though it does not explicitly argue for locating the plant at New Hill, the report appears to pave the way for the Partners' intended outcome.

"We believe, very strongly, that the Partners' preferred site represents the most cost-effective, and environmentally sound, alternative that meets the needs of our local communities—and it's clearly supported by the draft EIS," said Apex Mayor Keith Weatherly at an April 14 hearing to receive public comments on the draft report.

The Town of Cary, as the lead agent in the Western Wake Partners, has already used its power of eminent domain to own and control the 237-acre parcel in New Hill.

The project includes a 62-acre plant and a network of pump stations and sewer lines, with an estimated completion date of 2013. The \$327 million price tag will be divided among the participating towns, whose financial burden has increased by roughly 70 percent since the project was first proposed. (Original reports estimated that the plant would cost \$193 million, and would be ready by the end of 2010.)

Under the new timetable, the project will miss a 2011 deadline, set by the N.C. Environmental Management Commission, for transferring water from the Neuse River basin to the Cape Fear River basin. (The proposed wastewater treatment plant would discharge water back into the Cape Fear basin.) New Hill residents say the deadline should no longer be used as a reason to site the plant in their backyard.

At the April 14 hearing, John Moore, a member of the New Hill Community Association, argued that using the same consultants in the recent evaluation biased the Corps' finding.

"You would not trust the words of a used car salesman saying that his mechanic checked out the car you're about to purchase," he said. "However, for this proposed \$327 million expense, the Army Corps of Engineers trusted data, and conclusions, that were paid for by the Western Wake Partners."

Unlike any of the other alternatives, the New Hill site would be located within a historic preservation district, and in a minority community. According to the New Hill Community Association, the site would impact 230 residents, more than three-quarters of whom are black.

However, the Corps' draft EIS argues that impacts to this "environmental justice" community can be mitigated. Providing water and sewer services to the community would help "substantially decrease the significance of any potential adverse impacts" to the community, the report states. And, like the original EIS report, the Corps' draft EIS downplays the minority population in New Hill by relying on census block data for the entire "service area"—not the area immediately surrounding the plant.

At the April 14 hearing, New Hill residents contended they were never involved in the site selection process, yet will shoulder the burden

[The draft EIS](#), commissioned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, compares the New Hill site with three site alternatives.

The public comment period to respond to the report ends **April 28**.

E-mail [Henry M. Wicker Jr.](#), or send **written comments** to: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wilmington District Regulatory Division, Attn: File Number 2005-20159/ Henry Wicker, 69 Darlington Ave., Wilmington, N.C. 28403.

of the Western Wake Partners' project, without any of the benefits of a wastewater treatment plant. (A water and sewer extension policy, for example, would still require New Hill residents—who rely on wells and septic tanks—to pay hook-up fees, and would only be available to a limited group.)

The New Hill site is the only site in the report that will require costly "mitigation" measures to reduce odor, noise and traffic—since it is the only site to be placed within a town center.

"Gosh, to me, you don't have to be that smart to say, 'Let's take it out of the center of New Hill—where you've got hundreds of people—and put it down here beside a nuclear plant, where nobody lives,'" said Bob Kelly, a New Hill resident.

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