

Masthead



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Sewage plant holds growth key

Stunted Apex awaits New Hill facility

BY JORDAN COOKE AND TED RICHARDSON - Staff Writers

APEX When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gave its final environmental approval this month for the site of a regional wastewater treatment plant in New Hill, few breathed a deeper sigh of relief than Tim Donnelly, director of this town's public works department.

As the principal overseer of Apex's roads and the town's water, sewer and electrical services, Donnelly knows what the \$327 million plant would mean to this growing bedroom community.

While the project is important to all of western Wake County, Apex has the most to gain from it - and perhaps the most to lose without it.

"Apex will cease to grow if this plant is not built," Donnelly said.

The plant could be operational by 2013. But it faces opposition from New Hill residents who oppose it as much as Apex hopes for it. Cary, Apex, Morrisville and Holly Springs, collectively called the Western Wake Partners, joined forces in 2004 to begin planning the Western Wake Regional Wastewater Facility.

The project is intended to help the towns comply with a state environmental mandate to return water to the Cape Fear River basin and to keep pace with the towns' rapidly growing populations.

But Apex's population has already outgrown its infrastructure.

And that's a problem for a town that is trying to balance its tax base.

Homeowners account for about 81 percent of the town's current \$4.2 billion tax base.

The town has been trying to entice commercial development to balance things out.

Officials hope that a proposed development called Veridea will one day do the trick. But infrastructure is the key.

Spanning more than 1,000 acres, the project could include up to 10 million square feet of offices, 3.5 million square feet of shops, 2 million square feet of manufacturing space and 8,000 homes.

Balancing tax base

If successful, it could add 20,000 residents, create more than 30,000 jobs and generate an additional \$6 billion in tax revenue.

And because much of it would come from commercial property, Apex homeowners could get some relief.

The tax base could be evenly split between residents and businesses, said Apex Town Manager Bruce Radford.

Veridea is expected to take 10 to 15 years to complete, perhaps longer if the economy takes longer than expected to rebound.

But even if the clouds over the economy cleared today, little - if anything - could be built without the New Hill plant.

Only about 500,000 gallons per day of wastewater treatment capacity remain at Apex's current treatment plant, "which isn't a whole lot," Donnelly said.

And the remaining capacity has been promised to developments already in the pipeline.

Despite a contract with Raleigh that allows Apex to ship some of its untreated wastewater to the capital city, Donnelly said the town still finds itself in a tough spot.

"We're in danger of running out [of wastewater treatment capacity]," he said. "Absent the Raleigh contract, we actually have already run out. ... There could be no development of Veridea or anything else in Apex without the additional capacity to be provided by the regional plant."

Before that happens, a long list of state, county and local permits must be obtained.

The Western Wake Partners expect the permitting process to wrap up this fall, opening the door for construction.

The plant may also have to navigate legal challenges.

Opposition in New Hill

While Apex and other members of the Western Wake Partners anticipate the benefits of a regional sewage plant that's moving closer to construction, members of the New Hill Community Association keep fighting to keep that plant out of their neighborhood.

On Friday, the association hosted a barbecue and bake sale at First Baptist Church New Hill.

Proceeds from the event filled an old cigar box with enough money - \$4,648 - to help cover at least some of the legal costs associated with a potential lawsuit against the Western Wake Partners.

The association is being joined in its fight by the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, which won a \$10,000 grant in July to help litigate against the placement of the wastewater treatment plant.

The grant was awarded by the California-based Impact Fund, which provides support for litigation aimed at creating

economic and social justice.

The coalition has claimed that New Hill residents were not adequately consulted during the planning of the site and that other potential sites would have fewer negative impacts.

"The trucks aren't here yet," said Elaine Joyner, while serving up barbecue and potatoes. "Until they pull up, we're going to keep fighting."

Joyner grew up in New Hill. She knows about the recent environmental approval of the wastewater plant, and knows that time is running short.

"If we can't beat them," she said, "maybe we can at least broker some concessions."

Across the tiny fellowship hall at First Baptist, among tables laden with homemade cakes and pies, stood Vivian Joyner, no relation to Elaine Joyner but a close partner in this effort.

Vivian Joyner has lived in New Hill for 12 years.

She worries that her well water will become contaminated if the plant is built as planned about a mile from her home.

Joyner spent most of Thursday baking a lemon pie and carrot cake which she brought to the fundraiser.

"I believe in what we're fighting for," she said. "Even if we don't win, we've brought this community back together, and we're keeping this issue at the forefront."

Attorney Chris Brook, who represents the New Hill Community Association, calls the partners' timeline ambitious. But he says it won't outpace New Hill's legal challenge, should that prove necessary.

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