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The path of no more resistance

Chatham County line no longer barrier to Wake growth

BY TED RICHARDSON - STAFF WRITER

PITTSBORO Inside of a month, Wake County leaders have landed two key deals supporting a regional wastewater plant that will allow Cary, Apex and Morrisville to continue to grow and satisfy a state environmental mandate to replenish the Cape Fear River Basin.

In late January, the Partners settled with long-time opponents of the sewage plant in New Hill, and last week, Chatham County Commissioners voted to allow the Partners to begin securing an 8-mile wastewater pipeline easement through Chatham County to the Cape Fear River.

Despite concessions offered by the towns to end the long-standing resistance, many New Hill and Chatham residents still aren't happy with eastward growth by western Wake towns.

But growth is coming.

With one major construction permit remaining, the \$327 million regional sewage plant is on track for construction as early as this fall with a forecasted finish date in 2014. With the plant, Wake towns will have the sewage capacity to meet their needs for decades.

In particular, the new sewage plant may soon allow Apex to give the green light to Veridea, a 1,000-acre mixed-use development along U.S. 1 that could one day double the town's tax base. And Cary continues to build homes rapidly into northeast Chatham County - development that will also benefit from the plant.

Every Cary home and business west of N.C. 55 will be serviced by the new plant, including 2,000 Chatham County residents who live inside Cary's borders.

While recent breakthroughs bode well for Wake, they are forcing New Hill and Chatham residents to come to terms with inevitable changes reaching into their rural communities.

Bobby Horton, 69, has lived in New Hill since he was 4 years-old. The sewage plant will be built just a few hundred yards from his house, across the creek and through the woods, beyond his garden and tool shed.

"I thought I'd always be safe out here in the country," Horton said, describing how the Shearon Harris nuclear plant changed the local landscape and figuring the sewage plant would do the same. "I guess I'll just have to accept it because I'm too small to fight it."

Concessions end fight

New Hill community members were able to significantly delay the plant, which was originally scheduled to be completed two months ago.

To end resistance to the plant, the towns - known collectively as the Western Wake Partners - agreed to pay the community \$500,000 to build a community center and school bus shelters and offered residents near the plant free water and sewer hook-ups.

Those efforts have pleased at least one New Hill resident, Shelia Morrison, who read from a prepared statement at a recent public hearing in Moncure: "This facility will help us. It would ensure the future use of our properties. Your approval of these easements would ensure our future."

As part of their agreement, the New Hill Community Association agreed to no longer speak negatively about the plant and to encourage its members to do the same.

Last week, to secure pipeline easements in Chatham County, the partners offered the following concessions to the Chatham commissioners:

Pursue state legislation and local agreements to prevent involuntary annexation into Chatham County by Cary and Apex

Pay \$500,000 to help renovate a youth center or community center in Moncure near the proposed pipeline

Allow Chatham County businesses and residences a free tap into the pipeline for possible future use

With those concessions in hand, three Chatham commissioners, newly elected in November, voted to support the easement requests. The new commissioners characterized their support as a necessary compromise and the wastewater project as inevitable.

"The pipeline's going to happen," said Commissioner Walter Petty. "We can't stop it."

Moments later, just before the vote, Chairman Brian Bock said, "If we say 'no' now, we're giving up on economic development down the road. At this point, it's the best deal we can get, and the best deal for Chatham County."

Veteran commissioners Mike Cross and Sally Kost, sitting as bookends to the three new commissioners, did not agree.

"I'm related to four families that will be affected by the pipeline, and I'm a neighbor to all of them," Cross said. "I don't know one of them that wants it."

One resident actually did express support at a recent public hearing in Moncure, but Cross says that resident lives on the opposite side of the road from where the pipeline will run.

Disappointment remains

Sam Cherry owns 35 acres along Christian Chapel Church Road on the side where the pipeline will run. To acquire the 40-foot-wide easement, the partners, led by Cary, will try to negotiate the purchase of private land from 12 Chatham landowners along the pipeline path. Barring a settlement with landowners, the partners can seize the land through eminent domain.

"I guess I'll just wait and see what they have to offer," Cherry said, "but they better know I'm not going to just roll over."

Kost disputed the concessions, particularly the one aimed at preventing involuntary annexations.

"That doesn't give us anything," Kost said. "Saying you'll prevent involuntary annexation is no concession at all."

That's because Cary has never involuntarily annexed into Chatham.

Kost explained that developers, who buy relatively cheap property in Chatham County, request annexation by Cary to gain services that Chatham can't provide. Those developers then build high-density housing, Kost said, despite the objections of nearby Chatham residents.

The day after the Chatham vote, Commissioner Mike Cross wrote in his blog, "Without this wastewater discharge line, this type of massive growth would not be sustainable. Now it will be for a long, long time."

Previous Chatham commissioners, including Cross and Kost, fought last year for a list of pre-requisites before easement approval. That list included taking eminent domain off the table and requiring county approval for all annexations into the area.

Becky Barnes, whose husband Patrick Barnes joined that fight as a former commissioner, was perhaps more displeased than Kost with the partners' recent concessions to Chatham.

"We got zilch," Barnes said. "Cary thinks everyone wants to be like them, but this is rural out here, and we want to keep it that way."

And it is certainly still rural in many corners of Chatham.

A changing landscape

In one of those corners last week, Jim Slade, 84, sat in a rocking chair in his tractor shed, warming his feet beside a wood stove.

He has lived in a white farmhouse on Pittard-Sears Road for most of his life.

Slade's farmhouse now looks out over hundreds of new homes in the Carolina Preserve at Amberly, a Cary subdivision that straddles the Wake-Chatham line. An 8-foot-high wooden fence is all that separates Slade from the incongruous cluster of homes below.

"Those houses are so close together, if you break wind, your neighbor is bound to know," Slade chuckled, slowly rocking back and forth, noticing the rain drops as they started pelting the roof of the shed.

In a muddy field even farther below the farmhouse, three backhoes tore at the rocks and turned the earth, prepping plots for future homes.

Slade and his uncle had long since sold that land, his family's tobacco fields, to developers from Florida. They sold it again to another developer. "Money talks, you know?" Slade said.

When asked if he thought Cary would ever eclipse his farmhouse, Slade kept rocking in his chair and didn't even open his eyes.

"I doubt I'll still be around then," he said, "so I just don't worry about it."

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