

STATE and NATIONAL

Residents oppose putting incinerator near mental institution

By KAREN DIETRICH
Staff Writer

Granville County residents and groups advocating rights of the mentally ill and retarded are vehemently protesting the state's consideration of putting a hazardous waste incinerator near institutions for the mentally ill and the mentally handicapped.

"It's very unconscionable, that the Hazardous Waste Management Commission would consider this site," said John Baggett, executive director of the N.C. Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

"I think that the reasons why this site has been selected are very complex, but it certainly does seem to suggest that it's a location where we have what society calls 'throw-away people,'" he added.

The John Umstead Hospital, a hospital for the mentally ill, and the Murdoch Center, a facility for the mentally handicapped, are located near the Umstead Farm Unit, over 1,000 acres of public land, which the Hazardous Waste Management Commission designated as its current priority site for a hazardous waste incinerator and landfill.

One of the main concerns of protesters is that there is consideration for the needs of persons who are least able to speak for themselves and least able to have any choice as to where they are, said Mac Brownlee, Mental Health Advocacy Coordinator of the Governor's Advocacy Council for Persons with Disabilities.

Most patients can't go to any alternative institutions, Brownlee said. "These hospitals are usually the last resort."

"There are no private institutions to accommodate the type of people that

are there," George Cheek, member of the Murdoch Center Human Rights Committee, said.

The two mental health facilities are located within one-half mile of the proposed incinerator site, according to Fran Zankowski, spokesperson for Granville Residents Opposed to Waste (GROW).

"It's as if these people have no rights. We have here ... facilities that have a few thousand people. A vast majority are there involuntarily," he said.

The proposed location is also within a half mile of a federal prison and the C.A. Dillon School, a reformatory school for female adolescents, as well as being 1.5 miles from four lakes which provide drinking water to Raleigh, Durham and the Creedmoor area, according to Zankowski.

"Most people think the waste will burn and leave harmless ashes," Zankowski said. "But an incinerator cannot incinerate non-organic materials. Metals cannot be changed by burning. They will be spread through the atmosphere."

He said one example is lead, which can cause severe mental illness, especially in children, whether it is breathed through the nose or ingested through the mouth.

"They say they can bury the ashes in a landfill, but with as much water as is in those wetlands, it's going to leak. There has never been a landfill in this country that hasn't leaked," Zankowski said.

"There's no place near anybody where a hazardous waste incinerator wouldn't do any damage, but at this site it's particularly disgusting," he said.

But Shiva Garg, environmental en-

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gineer for the Environmental Protection Agency, said the incinerator should not pose any danger as long as it is properly managed.

"There could be short term problems from emissions, but with the proposed controls, the risks will be minimized. The cancer risk from emissions should be 1 in 100,000," Garg said.

Sudden mishaps at the facility could include explosions, malfunction of air pollution control devices, or spills of hazardous waste being transported to the incinerator, according to Garg.

"The maximum exposure risks are traditionally seen within a ten mile radius, but we calculate risks within fifty miles," Garg added.

The timely evacuation of patients and staff in case of an accident at the proposed incinerator is one of the main concerns, various state and hospital officials said.

"We don't yet have a plan comprehensive enough to address the evacuation off campus and out of Butner," said Jesse Goodman, member of the Butner Safety Task Force, put into effect by the

N.C. Department of Human Resources to look into the incinerator issue.

"I don't think it's possible to get people out of that community on time. It would take only seconds, in case of an accident, to engulf those facilities," Baggett said.

Brownlee said the official position of the Governor's Advocacy Council is to oppose "the selection or use of any site for hazardous waste disposal until an appropriate evacuation plan to ensure the safety of the disabled population is first put in place." The council will request to review any such plan, he added.

"It is clear to us that there isn't any evacuation plan that could get the patients out," Brownlee said. "There are many persons that are fragile or have trouble with mobility."

But even if the facility is operated safely, locating it near the hospitals could cause numerous problems.

"I'm trying to stay calm, but right now I'm concerned about public perception of the facility," said Gene Barrett, director of the John Umstead

Hospital.

"We have patients from sixteen counties," he said. "I am concerned about recruiting and retaining professional staff. There is already a continual shortage of nurses and physicians in all hospitals in the Triangle area. Some staff members have said they will resign (if the incinerator is built). This is a problem even if it's just a potential site."

Hazardous Waste Management Commission public information officer Marge Howell said the commission has begun to sit down with members of the community and directors of the facilities to get input on what assurances they want met and what individual needs and concerns are.

"The major thing the commission wants to do is provide for adequate evacuation procedures from the institutions and incorporate these into the planning of the facility," Howell said.

"We have an understanding and appreciation for the population in these institutions," she added. "We have meetings between all concerned. The site has not been finally chosen; right now we're trying to find out what the situation is."

The Department of Human Resources, which runs the state-supported Murdoch Center and Umstead Hospital, is also involved in the research process, according to Don Bowen, spokesman for the department.

"We're studying and revealing all

scientific information concerning the incinerator. The department is learning as much as possible to keep employees and clients safe," Bowen said.

But the issue is so emotionally charged, all findings are immediately questioned, Goodman said.

"Other people say the environmentalists don't tell the real story," Goodman said. "(The Butner Safety Task Force is) trying to get purely scientific information, so we can form an opinion."

Alvis Turner, chairman of the Hazardous Waste Management Commission and UNC professor of environmental science, defended the commission's consideration of the Granville site.

"We uphold the rules and take no action to harm the environment or human health," Turner said. "We would not put this facility in Butner if we thought any harm would come to the people in that area."

A decision will be made after the public hearing to be held in Butner on Nov. 15. But Zankowski said he was not optimistic about the commission's investigations.

"It is arrogance beyond belief that they don't come out to see the site and the people, and that they don't believe incinerators hurt people," he said.

"I would never go so far as to say they're killing the mentally retarded intentionally," Zankowski said. "They just have no compassion, not about the general population."

Undecided voters may hold key to Senate race

By KYLE YORK SPENCER
Staff Writer

As the closely contested U.S. Senate race draws near, Republican Sen. Jesse Helms and his Democratic challenger Harvey Gantt are vying for votes among the pool of the undecided, but experts agree that a variety of factors could sway these voters either way.

The key to winning the Nov. 6 election may depend on these uncertain voters, who are estimated to represent 6 percent of the electorate, according to polls taken by the Independent Opinion and Research Communications Inc. (IORCI) of Columbia, Md.

Although Helms' campaigners are taking nothing for granted, they say they hope to gain the majority of the undecided vote, said Chris Gardner, the political director for the N.C. Republican Party.

"Most of the undecided voters are men. We know we won't win women. But we think we can win the men," Gardner said.

Also, undecided voters tend to be conservative and are more likely to vote for Helms, according to Susan Bulluck, the president of IORCI.

To combat Helms' strong support among men, female voters have rallied around Gantt.

"With respect to gender there is more

inclination for women to vote for Gantt," said William Leuchtenburg, a UNC history professor.

This is partially attributed to Gantt's pro-abortion stand, but also to the fact that he frequently addresses social issues that directly affect many N.C. women, he said.

Polls taken by IORCI show that race, class and education are as important as gender in guiding the campaign.

Gantt is popular among North Carolina's poor and well-to-do. His supporters are more likely to be either college graduates and professionals or machine operators, food and textile workers and farmers.

Helms is generally supported by the state's middle class. His advocates include high school graduates with some college or technical training. They are often managerial sales workers, craft workers or self-employed.

Polls show Gantt with 81 percent of the black vote, while Helms has only 9 percent.

Yet Gantt's popularity lies in his success among both black and white voters, according to Leuchtenburg.

"Gantt is doing this well because he has a substantial number of white voters with him," he said.

Surprisingly, Gantt has had a tremendous impact on North Carolina's

white professional business class which has been inclined to vote for Republicans in past elections, Leuchtenburg said.

"There is a feeling that Helms is speaking about the North Carolina of yesterday, rather than the North Carolina of tomorrow," he said.

An additional factor is the unusually hard time incumbents are having in Senate races across the nation.

"People are angry at incumbents," said Michael Nelson, campaign coordinator for the Orange County Democratic Party. "They are more likely to vote against them because they don't like what's going on in Washington."

Leuchtenburg agreed that voter dissatisfaction with the Senate's performance on the budget would hinder Helms on election day.

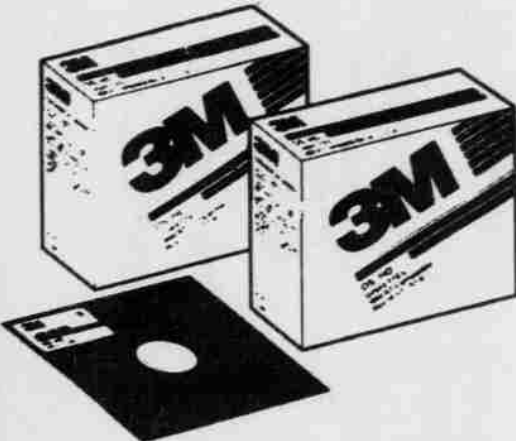
Despite the importance of issues in classifying supporters, there was some perception that this year's election has lacked substance and that voters were only concerned with 30-second commercials, said Thad Beyle, a UNC political science professor.

Yet Leuchtenburg said he believed Helms had damaged his campaign by limiting personal appearances and by refusing to address issues that concerned North Carolinians.

Although observers disagreed on the relative importance of campaign issues, all agreed that this Senate race was a heated one.

"If you're not involved in this race, then what race are you going to get involved in?" Beyle said.

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