

Water System Poised For Expansion That Could Double Customer Base

BY ERIC CARLSON

As the Brunswick County water system approaches its 20th anniversary next year, the board of commissioners must decide which of three proposed waterline extensions it will expect taxpayers to fund in the 1993-94 budget.

Already included in the county engineer's budget is a \$1 million proposal to run a transmission line under the Intracoastal Waterway from Long Beach to Sunset Harbor.

The Utilities Operations Board has asked for a \$1.4 million extension of main water lines down Stone Chimney Road and Mt. Pisgah Road, providing service in the Shell Point, Gray Bridge Road and Seashore Road areas. If approved, it would be the largest expansion of the water system to date, more than doubling its customer base.

The UOB also wants the go-ahead to create a new looping transmission line that would serve residents at the north end of the county between Hood's Creek and the Leland Sanitary District. A cost estimate for that project has not been completed.

Brunswick Utilities Director Jerry Webb hopes the commissioners can find a way to pay for all three projects. He constantly hears pleas from residents who suffer with unreliable wells and poor quality water.

While he'd like to see everyone get county water who wants it, he realizes that in the end, it will all come down to money.

"I'm glad I don't have to make those decisions," Webb said.

He has enough to worry about, overseeing the operation of a 45 million gallon per day (MGD) raw water intake and pump station in Columbus County, a 24 MGD treatment plant near Northwest, a 6 MGD treatment plant and well field near Southport, nine booster pump stations, a half-dozen storage tanks and miles and miles of pipe.

The water department currently employs 19 people in plant operations and maintenance, 12 for general maintenance of the system, a five-person tapping crew and eight administrative workers.

This being National Water Week (May 2-8), Webb is in the mood to pause and take a little pride in his department's accomplishments. He notes that the system is serving three times the number of customers it did in 1987. During that same period, the number of utilities employees has been reduced.

"We're definitely doing more with less," said Webb. Webb points out that the county's lone meter reader

must visit 4,550 water meters every 23 days. That's an average of one every 2.4 minutes, including travel time, he said. In an effort to keep costs down and avoid adding staff, the utilities department has decided to begin a two-month billing cycle beginning in July.

The county water system had its humble beginnings in 1974, when a well field and 4 MGD plant was constructed on N.C. 211 near Southport with a 24-inch line to its sole customer, the nearby Pfizer fertilizer plant.

The initial investment was a modest \$4.2 million dollars, for which the company guaranteed to purchase enough water to pay off the revenue bonds. But it put Brunswick County in the water business with service capacity to spare.

So a water line was extended to Oak Island and west to serve the Town of Long Beach. By 1981, more lines were run to Caswell Beach and across Lockwood Folly Inlet to serve Holden Beach. In the next few years, water mains were laid across the Intracoastal Waterway to Shallotte and down N.C. 179 to Calabash.

Asked why the system grew the way it did, Webb responds simply, "Because that's where the people were."

Faced with a rapidly expanding user base and a growing potential for more customers, Brunswick County voters approved a \$36 million bond referendum in 1985.

The money was used to build a 24 MGD Northwest surface water treatment plant and to run large transmission lines from there down U.S. 17 to Shallotte and along N.C. 87 to the original treatment plant. This not only quadrupled the system's capacity, but it also created desirable "loops" in the transmission line to help maintain constant water pressure.

The county also agreed to loan money to the Lower Cape Fear Water and Sewer Authority for construction of a 45 MGD pumping station in Columbus County. The facility draws raw water from the Cape Fear River and sends it to the Northwest plant for treatment.

A study of Brunswick County's water needs has determined that the current pumping and treatment capacity of 30 million gallons per day should provide enough water to handle projected growth through the year 2010, Webb said. The system is currently pumping an average of 8 million gallons daily. So what is needed now are the new transmission lines to get the water from the river to the customers.

In 1990, the commissioners approved a capitol improvements project to construct another pump station

and extend transmission lines west of Shallotte along U.S. 17 and down Thomasboro Road to Calabash with another line running down N.C. 904 to Seaside.

Next on the water wish list are the Sunset Harbor, Shell Point and Leland projects. By 1995, Webb hopes to see a line run down Ocean Isle Beach (Four Mile) Road from U.S. 17 to N.C. 179 and another along N.C. 211 from Supply to link with the original water plant near Southport.

Meanwhile, it is up to the Brunswick County Utilities Operations Board to see that the water gets from the transmission lines to the customers and to determine the best way to pass the cost of that service on to those who benefit from it.

To do so, the UOB creates Special Assessment Districts (SADs), in which residents of developments (or groups of developments) are charged a one-time fee to have waterlines run from transmission mains to their water tap. The UOB uses engineering recommendations and citizen input to determine the most equitable method of assessing each property owner.

In the past five years, the UOB has created 18 SADs for about \$2.5 million worth of waterline extensions totalling nearly 50 miles of pipe. In the process, new water service has been run to 5,215 parcels of land.

The next five years could see that number more than double. The Mt. Pisgah/Stone Chimney roads extensions would open up "the largest potential customer base remaining in the county," Webb said, with the addition of up to 7,000 water taps in Shell Point, Gray Bridge, Boones Neck and Seashore Road areas.

In an effort to keep the public informed about its past, present and future operations, the utilities department will commemorate National Water Week by setting up exhibits of equipment and materials used in water system operations at the county complex.

Also, the county commissioners, utilities board members, system employees and the public are invited to a special gathering Saturday, May 8, from noon to 3 p.m. the public assembly room.

"Most of all I want to show our appreciation for our employees," Webb said. "They're the ones who make this system work."

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—Jerry Webb, Bruns. Utilities Director

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Coastal Office Seeks Public's Views On Development's Cumulative Effects

North Carolina's Office of Coastal Management wants to hear from coastal residents regarding the cumulative effects of development.

A series of three meetings are being held along the coast this month. The first meeting was May 5 in Beaufort. The second will be May 19 at 7 p.m. in Bryan Auditorium at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. The last meeting will be held May 26 at Nags Head.

The information gathering is part of a four-year strategy for improving the coastal management program, according to spokesman Jeanette Johnson. Cumulative impacts are one of four areas the agency has targeted for improvement using a grant provided by federal reauthorization legislation. Others are wetlands,

ocean policy and special area management planning.

"We really don't have any development standards for managing cumulative impacts," she said. "In addition they are very difficult to measure."

"It's a hard concept because it's kind of abstract. Hopefully we'll get some really good suggestions at the meetings on ways of managing for long-term effect."

As an example of cumulative effects she cited this example: Plans are to build a bridge. There would be the immediate development impacts on wetlands, for instance, for which the state does have standards. But the project might also affect navigation, water quality as a result

of runoff, and future development.

"It can also affect traffic patterns and probably a lot of other things," said Johnson.

At present those effects are not factored into coastal development guidelines.

Along with ideas gleaned from public meetings, staff is also working with scientific calculations on trends such as population growth, garbage generation, existing development and other factors they're calling "growth coefficients."

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