

Powell Engineer Blasts Back At Sewer Plant Owner Burnett

BY ERIC CARLSON

One week after utility owner Billy Burnett accused hired consultants of exaggerating Calabash's sewerage needs in an effort to increase their fees, Powell and Associates engineers issued a 10-page written response that calls Burnett's charge "totally unfounded, malicious and slanderous."

In the Aug. 24 letter, Powell Engineer Jim Billups stands by his earlier assertion that Burnett's Carolina Blythe sewage system may suffer from stormwater infiltration problems that could be costly to Calabash if the town purchases the treatment facility.

The statement, addressed to the Calabash Board of Commissioners, responds directly to an Aug. 19 *Beacon* interview in which Burnett accused Powell engineers of misleading Calabash officials about the value and condition of his utility company in an effort to convince the town to build a larger sewer system than it needs.

Powell Associates denies the charge, saying design fees would actually be higher if Calabash chose to purchase Carolina Blythe as part of its proposed joint sewage system with Sunset Beach. Under that plan, the town would have to pay engineers to design a necessary expansion of the Blythe facility. Those designs would be needed in addition to planning for the regional system.

The consultants asserted that the regional sewerage

effort was initiated at the request of the two towns and was not suggested as a means of increasing their contracted services.

"The regional system has always been a part of the implementation program since the completion of the wastewater studies," the Powell letter said. "The statement or implication that design fees would in any manner influence our recommendations to the towns is totally unfounded, malicious and slanderous."

Powell Engineer Jim Billups repeated his charge that he and two Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) officials observed an overflow of wastewater at the Carolina Blythe plant that could indicate problems with its design or maintenance.

In last week's interview, Burnett contended that the overflow of treated effluent was caused by a backup in the town's drainage ditches caused by a severe rainstorm and was not indicative of an infiltration problem, as Billups claimed.

"...the plant was obviously hydraulically overloaded," Billups said in the letter. "Backing up of water in the discharge canals should not result in a spillage at the plant if properly designed."

"Either the discharge from the chlorine contact tank to the canals is not designed and constructed properly, or the tank does not have a rated design capacity, or there is

significant infiltration and inflow into the existing collection system.

"At any rate, the event raised questions in our mind regarding the value of the facilities and the FmHA officials expressed similar concerns."

In other statements made in the written response, Powell Associates said:

■The idea, proposed by some, of purchasing sewage capacity from Carolina Blythe for downtown Calabash, would be prohibitively expensive. The engineers estimated that "the up-front cost per two-bedroom residence would have been about \$3,600; per 100-seat restaurant, \$36,000; and per 200-seat restaurant, \$72,000."

■The engineers were never able to establish a true value for the Carolina Blythe system and acted under the town's direction when it sought advice from other consultants who suggested that it "might be worth substantially less" than the \$4.5 million purchase price Burnett said was "not negotiable."

■"Concerning the Carolina Blythe offer to provide temporary service for 300,000 gallons of day wastewater flow...we heartily recommend acceptance of the offer. We are concerned, however that either the DEM (Division of Environmental Management) or the Public Utilities Commission may not allow the temporary service." Billups said Burnett was not asked for a bid on

temporary service because he had previously indicated that it could be provided only as part of an agreement to purchase the company.

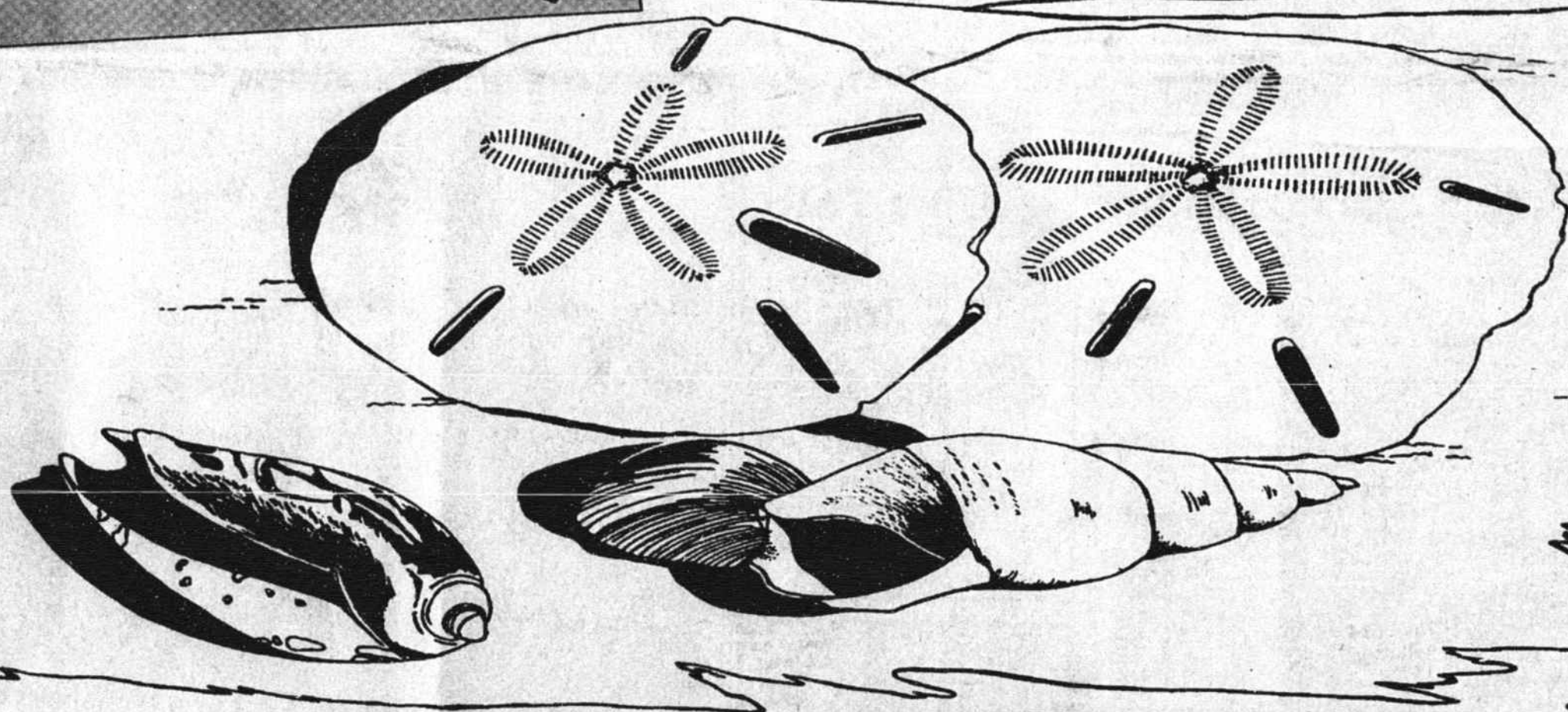
■The town of Calabash "cannot on its own afford to purchase Carolina Blythe and complete its expansion and the collection system program without exceeding the state-mandated limitations of debt based on tax value." Billups said the purchase and upgrade would cost an estimated \$10.6 million, which would exceed the town's maximum allowable indebtedness of \$7.2 million.

■It was the loud protests from residents of Carolina Shores, not the advice of engineers, that led Calabash to drop its plan to purchase Carolina Blythe. As a result of that opposition, "the governing bodies decided to put the purchase on indefinite hold and instructed Powell Associates to examine other alternatives for meeting both short-term and long-term needs. These decisions were made by the governing bodies and not by Powell Associates, although we concur with their decisions."

■Due to the current schedule regarding funding applications, the towns should put off any consideration of a Carolina Blythe purchase until after the South Brunswick Water and Sewer Authority is implemented. Billups said the authority would have more flexibility in financing the purchase "without any obligation of the tax base of either town."

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