

Reinstated Benton Mistakenly Sent Home His First Day Back

BY SUSAN USHER

A school system maintenance supervisor's return to work after being fired then reinstated by the Brunswick County Board of Education was anything but straightforward Monday.

Odell Benton was fired by the school board in December, effective Jan. 3, for his alleged role in the sale of used cafeteria equipment at a price substantially below its value.

However, after hearing Benton's grievance on Jan. 18, a board majority agreed that Benton should be reinstated and directed board attorney Glen Peterson to notify him by letter of that decision, which was to have remained confidential, said board Vice Chairman Yvonne Bright.

The information was given to at least one area reporter who contacted Benton before he received any official or unofficial notification. Board Chairman Donna Baxter later contacted Benton by telephone over the weekend to tell him he should report to work on Monday.

Benton arrived at the school maintenance garage at Bolivia Monday morning to an awkward reception.

Assistant Superintendent Bill Turner later said he didn't know how to handle the situation, that after talking with Superintendent Ralph Johnston last Thursday he had understood no action regarding Benton was to be taken until Johnston heard from the attorney.

"I was waiting for instructions from the superintendent," said Turner. "I didn't know what to do."

After greeting Benton, he advised the supervisor that it was "up to him" whether to remain on the job Monday without knowing whether he would be paid for the day, because he had not received the expected notification.

Johnston and Baxter were out of town at a superintendent/chairman conference, but Johnston was reached Monday afternoon by his administrative assistant. He sent Turner word that Benton was to return to work Tuesday and would receive pay for Monday.

"It was a communication problem," said Turner. "I

called Odell Benton and apologized." He also had a maintenance truck delivered to Benton's house at Shallotte Point Monday evening.

Except for the circumstances, as a maintenance supervisor Benton normally would have had a county truck at his home for responding to service calls at all hours.

Turner said he was not aware that Benton reportedly ended up hitchhiking home Monday, saying it was his understanding Benton was offered a ride on the next truck going to that part of the county, but declined.

"It's all over now," said Turner. "The important thing is he is back on the job. I want us to go on with the good things we are doing."

Benton, who could not be reached by telephone Tuesday, was fired after an investigation into the sale last summer of used cafeteria equipment. The equipment had been taken from Southport Elementary School during renovations and stored at the maintenance garage.

Child Nutrition Director Rebecca Brandon later sold

the equipment to Oak Island restaurant owner Jarvis Jones for \$350, and the equipment was delivered by school maintenance personnel. Jones resold 12 of some 46 items for \$7,800 to a restaurant supply business in Wilmington owned by a relative.

The school system has filed suit to recover either the equipment or its cash equivalent from Jones, saying that the equipment should never have been sold.

However, Jones' answer to that complaint asks that the case be dismissed because the school board fails to state a cause of action upon which relief can be granted.

He pleads as his defenses "payment, release and accord and satisfaction," since the school system accepted his check and delivered the equipment as agreed upon.

Jones admits writing the check to Brunswick County Schools for \$350, said he received immediate delivery of some of the items listed by the school system and sold "certain items" of the property to The New Ed Carolina Restaurant Equipment for \$7,800.

Landfill Siting Group's Work Is Suspended For 'Internal Study'

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of the sites rated by the task force.

He also doesn't support siting in the northern end of the county because of the hauling costs involved.

"A landfill is a dirty thing, but we're going to have to have it. Even if we use an incinerator, we can't do without one."

Speakers at the Jan. 11 session mainly told the siting committee they didn't want a new landfill anywhere near where they live, or where it has any chance of contaminating groundwater wells or shell-fishing waters.

At that meeting the Inter-Agency Solid Waste Task Force reported it had made brief visits to and studied materials on five possible sites in the Supply/Bolivia area that had been recommended for further study,

pointing out advantages and disadvantages of each site.

Rated as most suitable overall was a 570-acre tract bordered to the north by a tributary of Lockwood Folly River along Gilbert Road and about 1.8 miles east of Antioch.

Rated as second-best was the Royal Oak tract of concern to Clemmons and Burney. The 300-acre tract is located north of U.S. 17, west of N.C. 211 and south of Little Macedonia Road. The tract is bordered by Middle River to the west and Royal Oak Swamp to the south. Though one of the smallest of the sites, it was identified as "most suitable with respect to potential impact on groundwater and resulting public hazard."

Siting committee members said they wanted to study the 17 pages of new information further before mak-

ing a recommendation, and set a Jan. 25 meeting date.

Though an "overflow" crowd was expected to attend, that meeting was not to have been a repeat of the Jan. 11 public meeting. County Engineer Robert Tucker said the committee had planned for it to be a work session, with the public welcome to observe and to submit written comments or petitions, but not to make oral comments.

"I think it is an unfortunate circumstance that they're not going to be allowed the opportunity to sit down and begin discussion," said Tucker, who said he had been instructed "to cancel the meeting and suspend action for the moment."

He said the county is rapidly approaching the point where "our back will be to the wall" in terms of meet-

ing a January 1, 1998, deadline for opening an artificially lined landfill site.

While the county has been talking with Columbus County about the possibility of hauling trash to a regional landfill proposed to be built there, right now Columbus County is in the same position as Brunswick. No site has been chosen and no construction begun, leaving Tucker with no information on factors that would influence that decision: distance for hauling, tipping fees and timetable. There is no guarantee the Columbus County landfill will be built by the time Brunswick County needs one.

"I'm not comfortable with delaying or stopping our process; I'm not in the practice of evaluating what-ifs," he said.

"I'm sure from their (county ad-

ministration/policy makers) perspective that there is a good reason for canceling the meeting, but I hope everyone understands the timetable we're under. It's critical we move forward."

"It's critical we move forward."

Tom Rabon of Winnabow, the commissioner who serves as liaison with the siting committee, said that while it was the county manager's decision to cancel Tuesday's meeting, he also thinks additional study is needed.

Rabon said he wants to look at other alternatives to not only landfill sites but "the whole sphere." He would like personally to see some of the county's trash going to the New Hanover County incinerator and to the regional landfill in Columbus County.

"I would like to be able to send most of it out of the county, but I know we don't have that option now."

He said he knows that no matter where the landfill is put there will be opposition.

"Everybody says put it in the Green Swamp, but that is very impractical," said Rabon. "I don't have the answer."

"I'm not planning on letting us (the county) get behind schedule unless the voters decide not to return me to office. I don't intend to let that happen if I am still a commissioner."

Committee member Joe Cox could not be reached for comment and member Wilton Harrelson did not return several telephone calls. They are the other two siting committee members from the southwestern area of the county.

Sewer Plan Topic Of Sunset Hearing

(Continued From Page 1-A)

ter usage records for the past two years and are willing to talk with any residents who want to know what their sewer charge will be.

Tom Pope, a local builder, was among those urging the town council to proceed with a sewer system.

He said regulations are becoming more and more stringent on the use of conventional septic systems and the day is coming when it will be nearly impossible to repair one.

"We must have sewer and we must have it immediately..." Pope said. "Now is the time. Now is the hour. Let's move ahead."

Several speakers said the town needs to control stormwater runoff as much as it needs a sewer system.

Owen Weddle said the town council has spent thousands of dollars to plan a sewer system, and he suggested the board start spending some to plan a stormwater runoff system.

"If we go ahead with a sewer system without stormwater management, what we face is rampant growth, the kind of growth that will create environmental degradation," Weddle said.

Mayor Mason Barber indicated that there will be a meeting of officials from several area towns in the near future to discuss a joint effort to control stormwater runoff.

"The county's getting involved. We're getting started," Barber said.

Judy Van Winkle asked if the town council will do anything to control growth once the sewer system is constructed.

"We have to look toward the future and protect ourselves," she said. "There's got to be some limitation as far as what can be developed and what cannot be developed."

Barber said Sunset Beach is already zoned to control development. "It's something that can be looked at, but I don't give it much hope," he said of additional measures.

Cletus Waldmiller, president of the Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association, said he was speaking on behalf of the group's members and had several concerns about the facilities plan.

"There a lot of misinformation

before the public," he said. "They do not know it's going to cost \$34.9 million."

Waldmiller also questioned the proposed system's capacity of 2 million gallons per day. He said figures in the plan indicate the treatment capacity will be exceeded in 1998.

Responding to other questions posed by Waldmiller, Billups said the \$114,000 estimate for operation and maintenance was reduced \$300,000 in the latest plan because sludge removal costs will be less than anticipated.

Billups also said the projected collection of \$1.2 million in impact fees is based on an annual growth rate of 6.32 percent. He said Sunset Beach is growing faster than that now, and a sewer system could speed it up.

Owners of existing homes will not pay impact fees when the sewer system is built. The fee will be \$2,000 for each new home, and higher for businesses.

Tombro said people who water their lawn or garden will have the opportunity to install separate water meters for irrigation so they won't incur unnecessary sewer charges.

One man in the audience said estimated costs for large projects such as a sewer systems are usually about 50 percent below the actual cost.

Billups said the engineers' estimates are conservative and were based on bids the firm has received over the last few years. "We feel very comfortable with the cost estimates we've provided," he said.

The 201 Facilities Plan is required under the Clean Water Act of 1972 for any projects using federal funds. The local project is scheduled to receive approximately \$3.8 million in State Revolving Fund loans, which was initially funded through the EPA.

The plan analyzes alternatives for wastewater management in an effort to identify those that are most cost-effective and environmentally sound.

Written comments on the plan will be received at Sunset Beach Town Hall until Feb. 9 at 4 p.m. All comments and questions will be addressed in a later addendum to the 201 Facilities Plan.

Authorization Passes

In a special meeting Jan. 20, the Sunset Beach Town Council approved the authorization of \$5 million in general obligation sanitary sewer bonds subject to an April 5 referendum.

However, town officials were quick to point out that the bonds would "authorize, but not obligate" the town to issue general obligation bonds to fund a portion of the sewer project.

"If you've got the grants, you won't have to issue any of it," Tombro advised.

Some council members said they were uneasy with the idea of asking voters to approve general obligation bonds the town has no intention of issuing.

"Why do we have to advertise it as a bond to raise taxes if that's not what we intend to do?" asked Council member Cherri Cheek.

Mayor pro tem Ed Gore responded, "There's no other mechanism in

the state statutes other than bonds—you can't just have a straw vote. If the referendum is positive, the (South Brunswick) Water and Sewer Authority will be activated, and they will do all the borrowing through revenue bonds."

The formats for council's motions, advertisements and other procedures related to bonds are dictated by law.

Councilman Herb Klinker said he was worried about the wording of the required newspaper advertisement for the bond referendum. "People are going to read this and say the town is going into debt for \$5 million. The voters will not know that the total (sewer project) funding is \$34 million."

"I want people to vote for the referendum; I want people to know we'll never issue these bonds."

Town Attorney Mike Isenberg warned against Klinker's suggestion the town publish a disclaimer ad next to the referendum notice. "If something happens with your other sources of revenue, this gives you the authority to issue \$5 million in bonds. It authorizes, but does not obligate. But you legally can't do anything to take away from the authority of this bond order."

Cheek, on whose motion the authorization unanimously passed, said, "This is where the level of trust in the elected officials has to come in—that what we're saying is what we intend to do."

A public hearing on the bond authorization was scheduled for Feb. 7 at 7 p.m. in Sea Trail's Maples Clubhouse, to be followed by the town council's regular monthly meeting.

Temper Flare

The sewer issue continues to be a touchy one among some island residents and property owners who believe the area's real pollution problem is unmanaged stormwater runoff.

SBTA president Waldmiller said he was ordered to leave a meeting of the town's Citizens Advisory Panel on Wastewater Jan. 18 in violation of the N.C. Open Meetings Law, but panel chairman George Knott said Waldmiller disrupted the meeting and necessitated its adjournment. Waldmiller said the meeting was adjourned when he refused to leave unless directed by a police officer to do so.

Waldmiller, Klinker and citizen Bob Kakos attempted to sit in on the meeting between Billups and panel members Knott, Annette Odom, Al Consalvi and John Watts on Tuesday.

Watts, a former SBTA officer who recently moved to South Carolina, said Mayor Mason Barber asked him to continue serving on the panel even after he had moved, but that he was not invited to the Tuesday session.

The meeting was re-convened on Friday at the town hall, with Waldmiller, a reporter and Officer Ed Rudloff observing.

With Watt dissenting, the panel once again endorsed the ongoing sewer project and recommended that an interim stormwater management ordinance be drafted by the town planning board.

Calabash To Expand Town Hall

BY ERIC CARLSON

Residents of Calabash will soon get the chance to attend public meetings without standing in the hallway or sitting in the laps of their town commissioners now that the board has agreed to expand the town hall.

With very little discussion and even less dissent, the board voted unanimously Tuesday night to authorize the planning and construction of a 612-square-foot addition to the cramped building that currently houses the town clerk, a secretary, the town building inspector and the commissioner's meeting room.

The addition will include a 396-square-foot public meeting area with seating for 45 people. The current board room measures 264 square feet and barely seats 15 visitors. The area will be converted into a reception, accounting and data processing room under a new floor plan proposed by Commissioner Ed Schaack.

A second smaller meeting room, additional storage area and a second bathroom will be included in the addition.

Schaack, who is an engineer and the town's former building inspector, estimated that the addition would cost about \$24,480 and offered to design a new parking area for the building free of charge. He said the town would have to apply for a setback variance in order to complete the expansion.

The decision came after Commissioner Jon Sanborn asked the board to consider reorganizing the building's current facilities to make better use of its space. He suggested that the town create more work stations, add shelving and paint the building's interior walls.

"What Jon is suggesting is a band-aid. We need a total cure," Schaack said. "This will give us enough room until we can get into a new building. Let's advertise for bids and proceed. We're just strangling ourselves in here."

Newly elected Commissioner Teddy Altreuter said

she felt the board ought to study the idea first. But other board members quickly endorsed Schaack's plan as one whose time has come.

"We've kicked this around for a long time," said Bob Noe. "It's going to be three or four years before we have a new building. We should look at this one as an asset. It's valuable commercial property that will only increase in value with the addition. I see no reason not to proceed."

Altreuter also questioned whether the new addition would provide enough space for a town manager. It was suggested that the second meeting room could be used for another office if the board decides to hire a manager.

The board agreed to contact architects, advertise for bids and get started on the addition as quickly as possible.

Another of Schaack's ideas was less warmly received, especially by the District 1 representatives of downtown Calabash. He suggested that the town consider adopting a local option sales tax on restaurants and motels, "to get us away from funding everything with property taxes." He said that any money collected from the business tax would be used to facilitate tourism.

Schaack said the idea was mentioned to him by a local businessman.

"I bet it wasn't anybody in the restaurant business," said Commissioner Keith Hardee.

Noe suggested that the town could also look at putting a tax on golfers, to which Mayor George Anderson replied, "You put a one-dollar tax on every golfer and you'd be hung at high noon."

Commissioner Forrest King said such a tax "was only fair, if you're going to tax the downtown."

Both ideas quickly faded from discussion without action by the board.

Elections Board Clears Leland Registrar

Leland Precinct Registrar Helen Best will be back at her usual post on Feb. 8, when Leland Sanitary District voters go to the polls a second time.

The Brunswick County Board of Elections determined Friday that Best should not be dismissed as a result of conduct during the Nov. 2 election.

"There is not substantial evidence that she intentionally committed a willful wrong or other misconduct," stated the formal conclusions of law signed by Chairman Orie Gore.

After some Leland voters who were not residents of Leland Sanitary District were allowed to vote in the Nov. 2 sanitary district election, which was later invalidated, the State Board of Elections ordered the local board to conduct a hearing on Best's conduct and employment.

The hearing was held Jan. 11 in county commissioners' chambers.

From testimony and records that were part of that hearing, the board

noted its findings of fact and conclusions of law.

Among other findings it noted that Best had been provided a list of all registered voter in the precinct, but not sanitary district voters.

It was 3 p.m. that Tuesday before precinct officials realized that everyone should not be receiving both the state ballot and sanitary district ballot. Only district residents were to vote for district directors.

Because of a computer error not caught in the office, sanitary district residents had not been identified on the voter print-out.

After calling the problem to the attention of the county board of elections office, the registrar was instructed by Deputy Supervisor Lois Baccarny to question voters the remainder of the day as to whether they resided within the district.

After Best discussed that directive

with election judges Helen Mapson and Mickey Bullock, the trio decided it "would best serve the voters of Leland Precinct to continue on as they had been doing" when the error was discovered.

When the voting equipment and ballots were returned to the elections office that night, Best informed Baccarny and board of elections secretary Marion Davis of their actions.

On Feb. 8 Leland Sanitary District voters will return to the Leland, Woodburn and Navassa polling places to elect five district directors from a field of six candidates. First time around, only four votes separated the last two candidates—Brunswick County Planning Director John Harvey and incumbent Julius Adams. Also on the ballot are Joseph Gainey, Elgie Jones, Albert Mitchell and Edison Moore.

Another Cold Blast Expected

Enjoy the reprieve while it lasts, because a second blast of cold weather is expected next week.

"This next cold may not be as intense as the last, but I wouldn't put away the winter gear yet," said Jackson Canady, an amateur meteorologist from Shallotte Point. "What we're having now is basically the January thaw, and all indications are that next week it will be over with for us."

For the remainder of the current week into the weekend, he anticipates temperatures ranging above average, from the upper 30s at night to the upper 50s during the daytime, with about a half-inch of rainfall.

Canady logged a broad range of temperatures for the period of Jan. 18 through 24, from a low of 13 degrees on Jan. 19 to a high of 65 degrees Monday, Jan. 24. A daily average high of 49 degrees combined with an average nightly low of 24 degrees for a daily average temperature of 36 degrees, which Canady said is about 10 degrees below average.

For the period he also measured 1.05 inches of rainfall.

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