

Calabash 'Intends' To Purchase Carolina Blythe; Or Maybe Not

BY ERIC CARLSON

The Calabash Board of Commissioners on Tuesday unanimously agreed to notify the president of Carolina Blythe Utilities that the town "intends" to purchase the company.

But that doesn't necessarily mean the town will buy the sewage treatment operation that serves the Carolina Shores golf and retirement community.

The commissioners agreed to write the letter of intent to company president Billy Burnett in order to

gain access to previously withheld information the board feels it needs to determine whether acquiring Carolina Blythe would be in the town's best interest.

"The purchase will be predicated on our thorough study of your facilities, operating and maintenance cost, profit and loss statements, all contracts, customer information and any other pertinent information we may require to assure our town that this purchase is advantageous to us," the letter said.

Calabash considered buying

Carolina Blythe early in its planning for a municipal sewer system. But negotiations with Burnett broke down after he set a "non-negotiable" asking price of \$4.5 million refused to allow the town's engineers access to his books.

Board members have also expressed concerns about unknown financial agreements Burnett might have with customers and potential users that the town would have to take on if it bought the company.

Commissioner Theodora Altreuter told the board Tuesday that in a

March 17 telephone conversation, Burnett indicated he would give the town the information it needs only if the town sends him a "letter of intent to purchase" the company.

"I don't know that we intend to purchase it," said Commissioner Keith Hardee.

"Perhaps we should remove the word 'intends' and say 'is interested in purchasing,'" suggested Mayor George Anderson.

"That's the word he wants," Altreuter replied. Town Attorney Michael Ramos

said the qualifying language in the letter assures that the town would not be legally committing itself to a purchase.

"As far as binding yourself, you're not," Ramos said. "If you don't like it, you don't have to buy it."

Commissioner Forrest King expressed concern announcing plans to reopen negotiations with Burnett might "send the wrong signal" to the town of Sunset Beach, which has joined Calabash in forming the South Brunswick Water and Sewer Authority.

The comment sparked a brief flurry of heckling from Carolina Shores residents in the audience who oppose the joint sewerage venture.

"We are in a partnership with them," King said.

After discussing who should sign the letter, the board agreed that the names of the mayor and all of the commissioners should appear on the document.

The letter advises Burnett that representatives of the town will con-

tact him "to arrange for a mutually convenient time to meet and begin our negotiations."

In other business the board heard a report from Commissioner Alvin Leisey on a recent meeting of the town's Long Range Planning committee. He said the group agreed that the town should consider including funds in the upcoming budget to hire a town administrator.

The committee also discussed annexation, the need to identify a possible site for a new town hall, the creation of a public park and ways of attracting a nursing home or convalescent care facility to the area, Leisey said.

Commissioner Jon Sanborn suggested that the committee should set its priorities for the coming year and include the necessary funding recommendations in its upcoming budget proposal.

The board also voted to allow the Calabash Volunteer Fire Department to hold its annual fund raising "bucket shakes" at the intersection of N.C. 179 and River Road.

County Adds Its Support To Sewer Authority

BY SUSAN USHER

Brunswick County Commissioners committed Monday to helping develop wastewater management services in southwestern Brunswick County by transferring some of its powers to the South Brunswick Water & Sewer Authority and becoming one of its members.

Both moves are subject to conditions aimed at protecting the interests of county taxpayers.

The authority is the quasi-governmental unit being created by the towns of Sunset Beach and Calabash to operate a \$34.9 million sewer system proposed to serve much of southwestern Brunswick County.

County participation and transfer of certain of its powers hinge first on passage of a sewer bond referendum by Sunset Beach voters and realization of the funding package sought by the authority.

If the vote is yes at Sunset Beach, the authority will swing into action to formalize its existence and to

complete system design and applications for low-interest loans it expects to receive from the state.

The authority expects to borrow \$3.8 million from the N.C. State Revolving Loan Fund and \$5 million from the N.C. Clean Water Bond loan fund, both administered by the N.C. Division of Environmental Management. Those loans are available on condition that the authority have the ability to require residents and businesses in the service area to connect to the system. The authority has no power of its own to mandate hook-on. It must be granted that discretionary power by its local government members.

The service district ranges from the Calabash area near the South Carolina state line back along N.C. 179 to Ocean Haven subdivision, including properties along N.C. 179, Old Georgetown Road, a section of N.C. 904 extending to Lion's Paw golf course, the town of Sunset Beach and, unless Calabash Com-

missioners rescind their earlier decision, the downtown business district and surrounding neighborhoods in Calabash.

In addition to the loans, the system is expected to be financed by \$26.1 million in revenue bonds issued by the authority itself, not by its individual members. As the name suggests, revenue bonds are repaid by income generated from the system through user fees and assessments, not by levying taxes.

The authority has said the wastewater management program is to be paid for entirely from user fees and to not involve any permanent obligation of funds or the tax base of its member local governments. Repayment of funds advanced by local governments for the project are to be covered by interlocal agreements negotiated with the authority.

Sunset Beach Town Council says it has no intention of issuing the \$5 million in general obligation bonds it is asking voters to approve April 5.

Voting unanimously Monday night, Brunswick County Commissioners linked the county's approval of the interlocal agreements or contracts needed to allow the authority to require connections of the sewer system within its service area, provided:

■ that they do not require the direct expenditure of county funds or an obligation of the property tax base of the county; and

■ that they provide a method of deferred payment and or grant subsidy for eligible county residents who cannot afford the cost of connecting to the wastewater system.

Engineers for the sewer project envision the authority eventually becoming a total wastewater management entity. It would not only operate a regional wastewater collection, treatment and disposal system, but perhaps also operate septic tank management, stormwater management and sedimentation and control programs for its steadily expanding service area.

Board Agrees To Buy Site, Finance Leland School

BY SUSAN USHER

Local school officials got the go-ahead Monday night from county commissioners to proceed with construction of a \$6.4 million elementary school in Leland, but aren't sure they like the idea of paying for it on the installment plan.

Brunswick County Commissioners unanimously voted to purchase from the State Ports Authority for \$128,000 a 32-acre site on River Road at \$4,000 an acre, and to finance the school's construction. The 83,000-square-foot facility will serve an estimated 700 students in grades kindergarten through five. It is expected to help relieve overcrowding at both Leland Middle and Lincoln Elementary schools.

Responding to a question Commissioner Donald Shaw said he'd been asked, Superintendent Ralph Johnston explained the school board had sought to have the land donated but the authority instead had the parcel appraised and set its price, which compares well with similar land sales in the same area. The sale was approved by the N.C. Council of State earlier this month.

County Finance Director Lithia

Hahn said the county intends to pay for the school on the installment plan by selling certificates of participation that would be paid off over a period of 10 to 20 years. It would retain ownership until then, when title would be transferred to the school board.

The certificates could be sold either on the public market or privately to a commercial bank. Hahn said the certificates are a means of obtaining the money quickly and without some of the traditional costs associated with a bond issuance.

Out of the \$6.4 million financed, Brunswick County would be repaid the approximately \$985,000 it will have advanced the Leland project by the end of the budget year.

Half-cent sales tax revenue that must be used for school capital projects would be used to pay the interest on the long-term debt package.

Commissioners won't take action on the certificates until June or later, with the money expected to be available to the school system in August if the project remains on schedule.

Under the consent agreement reached between the two boards last August regarding the Leland project,

both boards must agree to the financing plan. The Brunswick County Board of Education hasn't done so yet, though it discussed the financing plan in light of the board's consent judgment with commissioners in a special executive session last Friday night.

"We've been apprised of the plan, but we hope we're not locked in to it," said Superintendent of Schools Ralph Johnston.

School board Chairman Donna Baxter and other members said they have asked for a joint meeting with commissioners to discuss construction financing plans. Along with the Leland project, they want to hear from commissioners on plans for financing other school construction projects included in a five-year-plan presented to and reviewed with Commissioners' Chairman Don Warren, Hahn and Yelton.

"We want to sit down with the full board and discuss it," said member Polly Russ. "We'd like them all to come."

Instead of agreeing to a joint ses-

sion, at the close of their meeting Tuesday night commissioners did what school board member Thurman Gause had been told to expect: They voted to have County Manager Wynan Yelton and Hahn review the financing plan with the school board.

Hahn said Tuesday she didn't know when the briefing would take place, but probably at a time requested by the school board.

Land Use Plan Is Varnamtown Topic

Varnamtown will hold a public information workshop on the town's land use plan Monday, March 28, at 7 p.m. at the town hall.

Planning consultant Howard Capps will review population and economic trends and environmental issues affecting the town, said Town Clerk Luellen Norris. He will also lead discussion of the results of past land use planning meetings.

Aldermen are encouraging all residents of the town to participate.

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