

Sunset Cuts Tax Proposal, Lectures Audience

BY SUSAN USHER
 An early budget debate that resulted in a 3-2 decision to cut the proposed property tax rate by a penny set the tone for a drawn-out Sunset Beach Town Council meeting Monday night characterized by flaring tempers, defensive posturing and acrimony.
 The barely-contained hostility wasn't limited to those around the conference table, as council admonished audience members on their behavior.
 At several points, Councilwoman Cheri Cheek, who repeatedly attempted to find grounds for compromise between argumentative fellow council members, characterized nearly continuous mumbblings, spurts of coughing, laughter and occasional outbursts from the audience as "rude and unsuitable." She said the background noise was affecting her ability to concentrate on the business at hand.
 "Sitting on council is not a real easy job; a lot goes on here that is important to the town," she said. "But it is difficult for me to concentrate on what I'm doing when people are laughing and cackling in the background. It really upsets me to see adults display some of these behaviors. We're talking about common courtesy."
 "We can bring a policeman in here to usher them out in the future," suggested Mayor Mason Barber, with Mayor Pro-tem Ed Gore adding

his agreement to "take whatever action is needed."
 Instead, council asked that Barber read a statement at the next meeting prepared by town staff four months ago at his request which he read Monday night that calls for courteous behavior on the part of attendees.
 A public hearing will be held at 7 p.m. June 20 on a 1994-95 proposed budget based on a 13.5 cents per \$100 of real property valuation, expected to generate \$429,715 with a 96.7 percent collection rate and a property tax base of \$329 million.
 After doing some "homework" on the budget, Councilman Herb Klinker proposed several amendments to reduce the tax rate to 12.5 cents per \$100 of valuation without "any serious effect" on town operations. But council members would only agree to two changes that dropped the rate one cent, not two cents.
 Finance officer Julia Thomas and Klinker voted against the 13.5-cent rate, for widely differing reasons. Klinker pushed for a deeper cut, saying council was "taking advantage" of revaluation, while Thomas has advocated no reduction in the 16.7-cents tax rate, saying the town needs greater reserves and that a tax rate is difficult to increase once cut.
 Klinker proposed reducing funds budgeted for the South Brunswick Islands Chamber of Commerce from \$12,000 to \$2,000 (already down from \$14,000 last year) and line

items for beach strand clean-up and disaster clean-up and sidewalks, and transferring a drainage project to the water fund. The cost of the water tank overflow containment project would be paid out of unappropriated water department funds, then the town would seek full or partial reimbursement through Powell Bill funds later in the year.
 "In most towns I've lived in the chamber of commerce was just that," said Klinker. "It was funded by local commercial establishments, not by the towns to such an extent."
 "Herb, you're in Brunswick County now," advised Mayor Mason Barber.
 When most members balked at any further cut in the chamber contribution Klinker agreed to keep it intact, but recommended that cuts be made elsewhere instead, without success. "I don't see anything in the economic environment to account for an 18.7 percent average rate of increase," he said. "It doesn't make any sense to me. This council hasn't examined this budget to see how it can keep the tax rate down."
 "We looked for six hours," interjected the mayor. "You're doing it with the numbers and not with the experience of a lot of people in this room."
 In a compromise motion by Councilwoman Cheri Cheek, who also explained how the chamber contribution is used, council agreed to transfer the drainage project to the

water fund and to cut the sidewalk line item, but would budge no further.
 The chamber contribution comes from the town's accommodations tax levy. The 3-percent tax paid by occupants of rental units such as vacation cottages, condominiums and motel rooms—of approximately \$300,000 a year and is used by the chamber to promote tourism and generate even more accommodations tax revenues.
 State lawmakers created the tax in 1991 as an added source of revenues to promote travel and tourism and to offset the "special service burdens" placed on local governments by transients, such as increased levels of services such as police protection, and higher-capacity water and sewer utilities, and to support travel and tourism development.
 The money can be used for sustaining those higher levels of service as well as for supporting advertising and promotion of the community; cultural, recreational and historical activities; sponsoring tourist-oriented events and activities; and financing tourist-related capital projects.
 A strong state hotel/motel owners' association lobby has threatened restructuring of the state accommodations tax law, saying the sums spent for promotion of tourism aren't "reasonable."
 "The lion's share is being used by towns for purposes outside the spirit of the law," Gore said Monday.

Proposal Would Link Wastewater To Start-Up Of Stormwater Program

BY SUSAN USHER
 Consulting engineers for the South Brunswick Water & Sewer Authority believe that steps outlined at a meeting with state officials Friday offer assurance that stormwater management will be a part of its regional wastewater management project.
 The Authority is the new lead agent in developing a sewer system to serve southwestern Brunswick County, including Sunset Beach and Calabash. Sunset Beach has pledged its intent to develop a stormwater management program too.
 The Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association has threatened legal action against the town of Sunset Beach should it participate in a wastewater program without stormwater management.
 Consulting engineers Joe Tombro and Jim Billups of Piedmont Olsen & Associates and Councilman Herb Klinker were at the meeting. They said state officials were enthusiastic that the project could serve as a model.
 The proposal was to be discussed at 7 p.m. today (Thursday) during a meeting of the South Brunswick Water & Sewer Authority at the Maple Clubhouse, Sea Trail Plantation.
 "I think all these agencies were very enthusiastic that if we follow through and implement this as specified, it should convince others that stormwater management on a preventive and remedial basis will be done," said Klinker.
 Billups and Tombro said the authority should adopt the ordinance being prepared by Sunset Beach with state grant assistance, and develop, on its own or through Brunswick County, a master stormwater management plan for the area to be served over the next 20 years.
 A stormwater plan would have to be completed, with a remedial program scheduled, funded and started, before issuance of a permit to operate a wastewater treatment plant. A treatment plant is part of Phase II of the sewer project.
 Council voted 4-1, with Klinker opposing, to hire consultants at an expected cost of \$17,250 to support revision of the environmental assessment in the project 201 Facilities Plan.
 Tombro and Billups are attempting to draft so careful an assessment that the state will decide a full environmental impact statement (EIS) is not warranted and allow the project to proceed, and that the findings will stand even if challenged in court.
 If the town's project partner, Calabash, refuses to split the cost of consultants' services, Sunset Beach will pay anyway and seek reimbursement from the authority. Klinker objected to Sunset Beach advancing the full sum since both communities stand to benefit; however others thought it unlikely Calabash would willingly pay since is the SFTA that has threatened suit and asked for an EIS.
 Consultants Richard D. Brown and Joseph W. Patten are to survey the project area in terms of wildlife and plant species and habitat types, potential project impact and possible avenues for mitigation of any damage, at a cost of \$6,250.
 Legal consultant Richard W. Evans with Moore & Van Allen of Durham will help shepherd the plan through permitting and review documents in light of reducing vulnerability to anticipated legal challenges by the Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association.

Shalotte Aldermen OK 37-Acre Annexation

BY DOUG RUTTER
 The Town of Shalotte loosened its belt Tuesday night and gobbled up about 15 acres of Main Street commercial property and another 22 acres of residential land on Pender Street.
 Town aldermen voted unanimously in favor of two landowner requests for annexation. They didn't hesitate to bring in the planned residential community owned by Alvin "Buddy" Milliken.
 However, some board members were reluctant to annex the five commercial parcels at the north end of town owned by Jo Ann Simmons, Bobby Long, William Powell, Wallace Smith and James Mulholland.
 The property is not contiguous to the existing town limits, and aldermen have said repeatedly in recent months they don't want to add to the number of unincorporated lots around town.
 Faced with a sewer system expansion project and the need to enlarge the town tax base, aldermen decided to go through with the annexation.
 They hope the one tract that separates the annexed property from the town limits will eventually be annexed as well.
 "If the town doesn't expand we're going to be a little town like Bolivia stuck on the other side of the by-pass," Alderman Carson Durham said in support of the annexation.
 Alderman Bill Allen said he generally opposes non-contiguous annexation, but he agreed to make an exception in this case.
 "We're talking about Main Street commercial area. I could not bypass that at all," he said.

Annexation of the commercial tracts even got the support of board members Roney Cheers and David Gause.
 Both admitted Tuesday that they have made statements in the past that they would never vote for non-contiguous annexation, but both men changed their minds.
 Before the vote, Cheers asked two of the property owners at the meeting, Powell and Long, what the town could hope to gain from annexation.
 "I think it's important for the town to grow, not by leaps and bounds perhaps but by the amount we're seeking tonight" Powell said.
 He said the annexation will allow the town to increase its tax base and collect more water and sewer user fees. In return, Long said the businesses will take up very little of the town's limited sewer system capacity.
 Long predicted that the one tract separating the commercial area from the corporate limits will become part of the town "in the very near future." The land is owned by Linwood Gray.
State Loan Contender
 Shalotte officials heard some good news Tuesday night concerning their planned sewer system expansion.
 Public Works Director Albert Hughes learned from a state official that the town stands a "good chance" of receiving a State Revolving Fund loan, which could be used to fund expansion rather than state bonds.
 The interest rate is around 3 percent for State Revolving Fund loans, while the rate on bonds is closer to 5

percent.
 If Shalotte gets the loan, Durham estimated the town could save at least \$15,000 per year in interest payments. That would mean a \$300,000 savings over a 20-year payback period.
 "He said we stand a good chance," Hughes stressed. "He's not calling us for nothing, but you still can't count your chickens."
 Mayor Sarah Tripp and several aldermen, possibly the entire town board, will travel to Raleigh June 23 for a meeting with state officials to discuss the proposed loan.
 "Oh that's great. We'll rent a bus and take everybody up there," Allen said.
 As part of its ongoing effort to raise money for the system expansion, the town board voted Tuesday to sell the timber growing on the sewer plant's existing spray irrigation fields.
 Board members accepted the high bid of \$23,000 from Twin State Forest Products Inc. of Green Sea, S.C. Their bid was nearly 40 percent higher than an offer from Federal Paper Board Company.
Reserve Fee Changed
 Aldermen approved a minor change in the capital reserve fee ordinance Tuesday that will allow the town to collect more fees if the use of a property is changed to the extent that it creates a greater burden on the sewer system.

Under the revision, a businessman who builds an office and later converts it into a restaurant will pay more fees. The rule will apply whenever a land use is changed and more sewer system capacity is needed.
 At their June 21 meeting, town officials plan to discuss possible changes in the acreage fees that industries must pay before they receive water or sewer service.
 Allen said Tuesday he would like the board to consider eliminating the industrial fee, which is \$2,000 per acre for water and sewer or \$4,000 if the property is outside the town.
 Doing away with the acreage fee, Allen said, would help lure industry to Shalotte and help bring down the area's high unemployment rate.
 "I think our obligation is to help establish as many jobs in this end of the county as possible," Allen said. "It's something I would like to see us look at to put people to work in this area."
 Hughes suggested the board check with Town Attorney Mark Lewis before it decides to charge businesses and not industries.
 "We just need to be safe I think," Hughes said.
Budget Workshop
 Aldermen recessed Tuesday night's meeting until Wednesday at 2 p.m., at which time they planned to resume discussion of the 1994-95 proposed budget. A public hearing on the budget is slated June 21.

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