

TWO-YEAR BACKLOG

Health Board Seeks Funding For New Septic System Inspector

BY ERIC CARLSON

The Brunswick County Board of Health will ask the county commissioners to spend \$40,000 to hire another septic system expert to catch up on a serious backlog in inspections that could result in the county being sued for not keeping up with them.

Estimating that the county's environmental health department is "still two years behind" in overseeing low-pressure, pump-type septic system inspections, health board member Bruce Quaintance warned Monday that "there could be legal problems down the road" unless more staff is hired to do the work.

Pump powered septic systems are more expensive and complex and require more maintenance than traditional gravity-powered septic system drain fields. The low-pressure systems are frequently used on small lots that don't have suitable soils or enough area to accommodate a regular septic tank system.

Brunswick County has more low-pressure septic systems than any other county in North Carolina.

"We're talking thousands of systems, not hundreds," Quaintance said.

In July 1992 state environmental regulators stopped overseeing regular inspections of low-pressure septic systems and required that counties do the work instead. Each system must have a designated operator who files regular inspection reports with the local health department.

Quaintance said a large number of operators aren't performing the inspections and the county doesn't have the manpower to make sure the state requirements are being met.

"This is a whole section where nobody is doing the job," Quaintance told the board. "It was thrown on us in 1992, but no more people were hired to do it. Some people are paying (operators) and no one is checking behind them to see that the inspections get done."

"It's our job to see that these people in Brunswick County are not getting ripped off," Quaintance said.

He warned that if a low-pressure system fails because it hasn't been inspected, Brunswick County could face a lawsuit for not making sure the work was done.

"It should never have gotten this bad, but it did," Quaintance said. "If all these systems start failing be-

cause we didn't do our job, we're liable."

Chairman Patrick Newton noted that the commissioners recently approved pay raises for environmental health inspectors. He questioned the need for additional staff.

"There needs to be something coming from the other side in terms of efficiency," Newton said. "Have we asked Mr. (Health Director Michael) Rhodes if he's done all he can do? It seems like every time we have a problem, the answer is to hire more people and spend more money."

Rhodes said the low-pressure systems "take a lot more time to inspect" and estimated that it would require two additional environmental health specialists working full time "to do it right."

Health board member Dr. Brad Kerr expressed concern about the consequences of not addressing the backlog.

"The larger issue is, if we don't do something about this and there are a large number of people who bought lots and can't build on them, we could be liable to the charge that these systems are not being managed prop-

erly," he said.

The health department does not have enough money in its budget to hire an additional trained inspector and to purchase a vehicle for his or her use, Rhodes said. He estimated it would cost \$40,000 to fund the position from January to June, when the new post could be included in next budget.

In a unanimous vote, the board authorized Rhodes to ask the county commissioners to fund the new position.

In other business, the board heard a report from its spay/neuter committee on a plan to require that all dogs and cats adopted from the county animal shelter be sterilized, vaccinated and given a thorough physical examination. The cost of the program would be shared by each pet's new owner, the county and local veterinarians.

Kerr, chairman of the committee, reported that the group is finalizing the plan and hopes to have a formal proposal for the health board to consider at a future meeting. If approved, the plan would probably not go into effect until the next budget year, Kerr said.

Better Manpower, Money, Morale Town Goals For Sunset Beach VFD

BY SUSAN USHER

Garnering manpower and money to boost fire fighting and other emergency services will be the focus of two committees appointed by Sunset Beach Mayor Mason Barber this week.

At the Nov. 7 meeting of the town council, a Sea Trail resident reiterated concerns expressed in writing by the Sea Trail Property Owners Association about local emergency services and the relationship between the town and the volunteer fire department that serves it.

"To outsiders it appears that fire and emergency medical services are not tracking the growth here," he said, referencing a letter sent by POA President Marvin Peters to the town. Sea Trail Corporation shares those concerns, said General Manager Dean Walters, "based on growth and what's happening here."

Mayor Barber acknowledged the community has "a long way to go" in bringing all emergency services to the desired level, but said the town is not likely to "throw a lot of money in one direction" without assurances of how it will be used.

Sunset Beach Volunteer Fire Department is a nonprofit corporation with its own governing board. The department contracts with the town to provide fire protection services and receives an annual contribution in return. It also receives contributions from Brunswick County and from private individuals and businesses, and holds fundraising events that include bucket shakes and monthly spaghetti dinners.

Its 19 members, a minority of whom actually live in Sunset Beach, serve an area larger than the town and respond to calls for mutual aid

from neighboring communities. As with other volunteer departments countywide, fewer members are available on weekdays than at night or on weekends.

Also like other volunteer departments, Sunset Beach VFD has "its ups and downs," said Barber. "The biggest two things are manpower and money, but money isn't a problem really. They need more people and they need a boost to their morale."

"I think we can work it out," he said. Any solution will require involvement by the community as well as town officials.

"Community people ought to be helping them with their fundraising. The firefighters shouldn't have to be cooking and serving spaghetti as well as giving their time for training and for answering calls," the mayor said.

The community could also provide more direct financial support. The most recent mailing by the department brought \$20,000 in contributions, which Barber said was "not a lot" given the community's 2,000 homes. "Some people think that if the town contributes, that takes care of it, but that's not enough."

The department has about a half-dozen members trained as first responders, said Barber. They answer medical emergency calls, providing first aid until more highly trained medical personnel arrive. The Sunset Beach area is served by Calabash EMS and Brunswick County EMS units.

The department has also been trying to establish and equip its own water rescue team.

According to Barber, the fire department receives mostly first responder calls. "They don't get many

fire calls, thank goodness."

Fire Chief T.J. Lyke has asked the town to consider making him paid staff.

Barber said the only way the town could consider going to a paid service is through a joint venture with another town, an alternative that isn't presently being considered but hasn't been ruled out.

The two committees will focus on raising manpower and money to sustain and improve existing fire and first responder services.

Councilwoman Julia Thomas, a former dispatcher and board member of the fire department, will serve on a committee named to work with the fire department. Other members are Bob Gallick, Carl Bazemore, Ed Hughes and Chief T.J. Lyke.

A second committee, expected to begin work next week, will work to foster community involvement. Members are Councilman Herb Klinker, Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association President Cleve Waldmiller, Robert Pierce and Sea Trail POA President Peters.

"They're going to get on it as soon as possible, but they don't know how much they'll be able to

do right away with the holidays coming," said Barber.

Some of the appointees met with Barber Tuesday to begin mapping out their effort, and both committees plan to meet jointly in the near future.

Peters is out of town because of a death in his family. Lyke could not be reached for comment.

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NOTICE OF A CITIZENS INFORMATIONAL WORKSHOP ON THE PROPOSED REPLACEMENT OF THE SUNSET BEACH BRIDGE (BRIDGE NO. B-198) ON SR 1172 OVER THE INTRACOASTAL WATERWAY

Project 8.2230101 B-682 Brunswick County

Representatives of the North Carolina Department of Transportation will hold a citizens informational workshop on December 6, 1994 at the Jones/Byrd Pavilion in Sunset Beach, North Carolina. This will be an informal open house workshop between the hours of 4:00 and 8:00 p.m. Those wishing to attend may do so at their convenience during these hours.

The purpose of the workshop is to present information, answer questions and receive comments on the proposal to replace the Sunset Beach Bridge on SR 1172 over the Intracoastal Waterway in Brunswick County. Representatives from DOT and Greiner, Inc.; a private engineering firm hired to conduct the associated planning and environmental studies, will be present at this meeting.

Anyone desiring information about this workshop may contact Ms. Julie Hunkins P.E., Project Manager; North Carolina Department of Transportation, P.O. Box 25201, Raleigh, NC or by telephone at (919)733-7842.

NCDOT will provide reasonable auxiliary aids and services for disabled persons interested in attending the workshop, to comply with ADA. To receive special services, please contact Ms. Hunkins at (919)733-7842 or you may fax your request to (919)733-9794 prior to the date of the hearing.