

Appeal Could Have 'Significant Impact' On Brunswick's Tax Base

BY RAHN ADAMS

Officials in Brunswick County are awaiting word from the N.C. Property Tax Commission on an appeal that could lower property taxes paid by forest products companies and cut into the county's tax base.

According to N.C. Property Tax Division Director Frank Goodrum, a consolidated appeal by four paper and forest products companies for lower property taxes was heard by the commission in September.

Goodrum said commission members "have deliberated and they have reached a decision." However,

the decision will not be made public until a written order is prepared and signed.

"We hope to notify the counties and the appellants in the next 30 days," Goodrum said last week.

Brunswick County Attorney David Clegg said the case probably will go to the N.C. Court of Appeals, whatever the decision.

"We're just waiting to see what's going to happen," Clegg said.

According to Brunswick County Tax Administrator Boyd Williamson, a ruling in the paper companies' favor "would have a significant im-

act," because five of the 10 largest landholders in Brunswick County are major paper and forest products companies.

A recent study by the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham shows that Federal Paper Board, International Paper, Boise-Cascade, Weyerhaeuser and Georgia-Pacific together own about 36 percent of the land in Brunswick County.

Those five companies control about 197,770 of the county's 550,714 total acres of land.

Across the state, the consolidated property tax appeal was made by

four paper and timber products companies and involves almost 148,000 acres of timberland in 16 counties across the state.

Williamson said the companies include Boise-Cascade, Champion International, Georgia-Pacific and Weyerhaeuser.

Other counties affected include Anson, Bertie, Bladen, Burke, Chatham, Currituck, Franklin, Granville, Hertford, Martin, Onslow, Pamlico, Polk, Rutherford and Washington.

Georgia-Pacific initially appealed (See APPEAL, Page 2-A)

County's Top 10 Landowners

Landowner, Address	Acres
1. Federal Paper Board, Atlanta, Ga.	96,879.2
2. International Paper, Wilmington	66,295.3
3. Canal Industries, Conway, S.C.	14,361.1
4. Boise-Cascade, Charlotte	14,091.1
5. The Nature Conservancy, Atlanta, Ga.	13,850.0
6. Weyerhaeuser, Plymouth	12,413.4
7. Orton Plantation, Winnabow	11,964.8
8. United States of America, Washington, D.C.	9,500.0
9. Georgia-Pacific, Atlanta, Ga.	8,091.3
10. Reeves Telecom, Boiling Spring Lakes	7,346.8

Sources: The Institute of Southern Studies and Brunswick County Tax Administrator's Office

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Southern-Style Winter Wonderland

Gause Landing Road near Ocean Isle Beach was transformed into a Southern-style winter wonderland Friday afternoon as the sun peeked through the gnarled boughs of beautiful live oaks laden with odd compa-

nions—Spanish moss and snow. Coverage of the surprise snowfall that blanketed the Brunswick coast is in-

STAFF PHOTO BY RAHN ADAMS

Commissioners Ask School Board To Seek SBI Probe Of Finances

BY SUSAN USHER

An SBI investigation may be forthcoming into Brunswick County school system finances.

While agreeing to make up \$290,000 of what had been a \$553,000 shortfall in the schools' operating budget, Tuesday night Brunswick County Commissioners also agreed the school board should seek an investigation.

Commissioner Benny Ludlum tacked the request to a motion by Commissioner Frankie Rabon to transfer \$290,000 from the half-cent sales tax fund for school construction to the schools' operating budget. Commissioners adopted both items unanimously following a brief discussion.

In making his motion, Ludlum said he agreed with people he had talked with that an investigation will "show we're all clear."

Afterwards, Board of Education Chairman James Forstner said, "I have no problem asking Mike Easley if something should be done."

Seeking further guidance on how specifically to approach the district

attorney, he later asked, "Do we have to say, 'Please?'"

Replied Ludlum, "Go and speak up like you're asking for this money and he'll listen."

If the SBI chooses to undertake the investigation, noted County Attorney David Clegg in response to a question from Interim Superintendent John Kaufhold, the cost would be absorbed by the SBI.

Transfer Sought

The school board first requested the fund transfer last Thursday night in a special meeting with the commissioners called ostensibly to discuss a 10-year capital needs plan. The transfer will leave enough money in the construction fund to match additional money anticipated from the state.

School system representatives told commissioners last week they were short \$553,242, or one percent of their \$55 million budget. But by juggling other items and cutting nearly \$43,000 from the local budget, the board made up \$350,000 of that shortfall. It asked commissioners for \$202,000 to cover the remainder and

for another \$88,000 as an operating reserve.

The N.C. Department of Public Instruction recommends the schools keep in reserve two to three months' operating funds. County Finance Officer Lithia Hahn advised commissioners Tuesday night that the school board could return at the end of the year to ask for another supplement of this kind.

Hahn, who had gone over the figures earlier in the day with School Finance Officer Elaine Shappell, told commissioners, "In review of the local fund balance of the schools, it is in dire straits."

Interim Superintendent John Kaufhold said schools and students weren't feeling the pinch of the shortage, that it is felt by the administration, because of the lack of cushion in the event of an emergency or unexpected expenses such as higher heating costs due to extended cold weather.

Educational officials had been aware of the shortfall since summer, but had not discussed it publicly during the meeting. (See SBI, Page 2-A)

WORK RELEASE RECOMMENDED

Four Sentenced For Cocaine Trafficking

BY RAHN ADAMS

Three Brunswick County residents and a Columbus County man were sentenced last week for cocaine trafficking during a special session of Brunswick County Superior Court.

While all four defendants received active prison terms, Judge Samuel T. Currin recommended work release for all but one.

Those sentenced last week included James Elmer Hatcher, 28, and Johnny Dale Wood, 19, both of Route 1, Winnabow; Kevin Layne Caison, 26, of Supply; and Ralph Louis Wheeler, 41, of Whiteville.

They were among 37 people indicted in Brunswick County on cocaine trafficking charges in June and July 1987 as a result of work done by the first special investigative grand jury used in North Carolina.

Hatcher received a split sentence—4½ years active and 12 years suspended, with five years of supervised probation to begin at the expiration of his active sentence. The court recommended work release.

Hatcher was indicted last June on four counts each of conspiracy to traffic in more than 28 grams of cocaine and trafficking by possession of more than 28 grams of cocaine; and one count each of conspiracy to traffic in more than 400 grams of cocaine and trafficking by possession of more than 400 grams of cocaine.

On Aug. 31, 1987, he pleaded guilty as charged.

Wood was sentenced to six years in prison as a committed youthful offender. He was given credit for the 218 days that he has already served in jail.

Last June, Wood was charged with one count each of conspiracy to traffic in more than 400 grams of cocaine and trafficking by possession of more than 400 grams of cocaine.

On Nov. 2, 1987, he pleaded guilty to one count of trafficking by possession of more than 200 grams of cocaine. Caison received a three-year

prison sentence, with immediate work release recommended.

Currin found that Caison had provided substantial assistance to the state, court records showed.

Last June, Caison was indicted on two counts each of conspiracy to traffic in more than 400 grams of cocaine and trafficking by possession of more than 400 grams of cocaine.

He entered guilty pleas to those charges on Aug. 13, 1987.

Of the four, Wheeler received the longest sentence, although he was one of the three recommended for work release.

According to the Brunswick County Clerk of Court's office, Wheeler received a split prison sentence last Thursday afternoon after pleading guilty to cocaine trafficking last August.

Judge Currin sentenced Wheeler to a 26-year prison term, 13 years active, 13 years suspended.

The judge ordered that Wheeler be placed on five years of supervised probation upon release from prison. The judge also recommended work release for the defendant, after 30 days.

Special Assistant District Attorney William Wolak said Currin found that Wheeler had provided substantial assistance to investigators during their probe of major cocaine trafficking here.

"In fact, he provided a great deal of assistance," Wolak said Tuesday.

Court records show that an SBI agent testified for the state during last Thursday's sentencing hearing, while six witnesses testified for the defense. Wheeler was represented by Wilmington attorney Bill Boney.

Wolak added that Wheeler's sentence "was proportionate to the damage he has caused in the community."

"He was facing a minimum of 136 years (in prison), so I think he came out rather well," said the prosecutor. Wheeler, who was indicted last

June by the special investigative grand jury, pleaded guilty as charged Aug. 13, 1987, to 10 counts each of conspiracy to traffic in cocaine and trafficking by possession of cocaine.

The offenses, which involved quantities of cocaine ranging from 28 grams to more than 400 grams, occurred between Dec. 24, 1985, and Feb. 24, 1987.

Last week, Currin gave Wheeler the active sentence on the consolidated trafficking charges and the suspended sentence on the consolidated conspiracy counts.

Prior to Tuesday's session of Superior Court—which was scheduled after court was canceled Friday due to inclement weather—13 defendants who had earlier pleaded guilty were awaiting sentencing.

Three defendants—Fotios Kamtsiklis of Greenville, Dale Varnam of Supply and Richard Woods of Calabash—are awaiting trial.

Two others—Alan Dale Brooks of Shallotte and Francisco Navarro of Ft. Myers, Fla.—remain fugitives.

Attorney To Challenge Redwine

While no new candidates have filed for local public office since last Tuesday, a county attorney said Tuesday he plans to file against incumbent State Rep. E. David Redwine in the Democratic primary.

R. Glen Peterson, 33, of Leland, will make his formal announcement as a House candidate at noon today (Thursday) at the Brunswick County Courthouse in Bolivia, with a press conference afterwards. A Brunswick County native, he is a partner in a Southport law firm.

Underground Gas Tanks Considered 'Probable' Contamination Source

BY DOUG RUTTER

State environmental officials last week discovered gasoline leaking from underground storage tanks suspected of being a source of well contamination in Ash.

Following an on-site investigation by representatives of the N.C. Division of Environmental Management (D.E.M.) in Wilmington, the company which owns the tanks was issued a notice of violation.

According to Bob Jamieson, Wilmington regional manager for the N.C. Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, "It's definitely been determined that the tanks have leaked product into the ground. We can't say for certain, but it's highly probable that the leak has a connection to that well."

The two tanks in question were removed from the grounds of Brunswick Farm Supply last Tuesday. Although they were located on that property, Jamieson said Collier Gas Company of Shallotte owns the tanks and is responsible for any material which may have seeped into the groundwater.

The tanks are thought to have caused the contamination of a private

well on the property of Ideath Marie Rowe, whose land borders that of Brunswick Farm Supply. Her contaminated well is about 150 yards from where the tanks were located.

Jamieson said that when the tanks were removed, investigators "found evidence of gasoline in the soil beneath the tanks."

He explained that while only one of the two tanks was in use prior to its removal, environmental officials discovered several holes in the unused tank, which contained both gasoline and water.

According to Jamieson, it appeared that the 500-gallon tank which was in use, connected through piping to the tank not in use, may have spilled over into the unused tank each time it was filled.

Following further investigation last week, Collier Gas Company Manager Donald Simmons said the unused tank had definitely leaked gasoline. He added, however, that no leaks were discovered in the other tank.

Brunswick Farm Supply Owner Donald Long noted that the tanks were at least 13 years old, already in place when he bought the business in

1975.

According to Jamieson, the violation does not carry an automatic fine. "At this point in time, we're not into the legal phase."

As far as responsibility for the possible contamination, Jamieson said that such cases are often contested between the gas companies and the businesses they serve.

"That may be something they have to work out between themselves," he said. "As far as we're concerned, the gas company had control over the product going into those tanks."

He explained that Collier Gas Company must next remove soil where the tanks were located, thereby lowering the chance of additional groundwater contamination.

The gas company must also drill monitoring wells to determine the extent of the gasoline leak and submit an outline reviewing how it plans to remediate the problem. This plan requires prior approval of the DEM groundwater section.

Jamieson said the company is required to have a written response to the DEM by Jan. 26. "They've been very cooperative during this inquiry. (See UNDERGROUND, Page 2-A)