

No Immediate Changes To Come In UOB, Water Administration

BY RAHN ADAMS

County officials indicated last week that administration of both the Brunswick County Utility Operations Board and county water department will remain the same indefinitely despite the hiring of a new public utilities head.

Jerry Webb, 39, of Smithfield, will take over as director of public utilities on May 16 at an annual salary of \$34,676.

"Right now, everybody is going to be doing exactly what they've been doing," County Manager John T. Smith said last Thursday, two days after he announced Webb's hiring.

"But eventually the UOB director (Webb) would handle both jobs," the county manager added, referring to the director's future role as administrator of both the utility board and water department. He said the changes would be made "whenever we can."

Brunswick County Commissioner Chris Chappell last week confirmed that Webb's hiring was directly related to the commissioners' recent probe into a racial discrimination grievance filed in March by six black water department employees.

The director's position has actually been vacant since 1981 when Webb himself resigned the post. It was reinstated last year and was advertised in September but was put "on hold" in February after commissioners could not agree on whom to hire, officials said.

Last week, commissioners determined that the employees' grievance did not involve racial discrimination. However, they found that "there were administrative procedures, as defined in the personnel policy, which were not strictly adhered to,"

according to Smith.

Chappell said last Thursday that commissioners began discussing Webb's hiring during an April 4 executive session, shortly after Smith told the board—in open session—that he had investigated the employees' complaint and that it should be addressed directly to commissioners as a racial discrimination grievance.

According to Webb, Smith initially contacted him on April 13—the same day commissioners met in secret session with water department heads over the grievance. The employees had aired their complaints to commissioners on April 11.

But Chappell indicated that Webb's hiring was not meant to reflect negatively on Water System Director Kenneth Hewett's performance.

"I feel like what he (Hewett) does in his capacity, he does a good job . . . but I felt like there needed to be a little more coordination because the department has gotten so large," Chappell told the Beacon.

Smith agreed that the water system has outgrown its current administration. "There's too much responsibility there for one person," he said. "There's a lot of work that needs to be spread out."

Chappell said the commission's recommendation to hire Webb was unanimous, although there was "heavy discussion over it" and "some different opinions" were expressed.

Last fall, UOB members also had some heavy discussion over the director's position, saying they wanted Planning Director John Harvey to be their administrator. As a result, Smith last week said he expects the UOB to request that Harvey serve as the UOB's administrative

staff on a permanent basis. Harvey has performed that duty part-time since January 1987. The UOB was formed in late 1986.

At least one utility board member—Ed Gore—last fall criticized the county's advertised job description for the director's position as being simply for a water system superintendent, which the county already had in Hewett. And despite promptings by the UOB, Harvey last fall asked commissioners not to consider him for the utilities director position.

Webb said in a telephone interview last week that his job as utilities director from 1977 to 1981 included supervising operation of the county's water treatment plant on N.C. 211. The Northwest treatment plant and its expanded water system was completed last year.

At last Wednesday night's UOB meeting in Bolivia, Harvey informed the board of Webb's hiring but told them it would not affect his own role as UOB administrator.

"He (Smith) sees this in his understanding from the board of county commissioners that unless you here would object, I will continue to do the work I am doing for you now and be your staff person," Harvey told the UOB. "Mr. Webb will be given assignments in various ways within the water system and perhaps other activities in county government where his expertise can be of value."

The UOB then unanimously adopted a resolution in support of

having Harvey continue to work with the utility board. "I'd like for the record to show that we are delighted and have no objections to John continuing in the capacity he has been," said Gore.

Smith said last Thursday that Webb's initial duty will be to study the operation and administration of the water system, then report to Smith and commissioners on his findings before assuming a more active administrative role in the department. No time frame has been set for that transition, Smith noted.

FAA Ruling Expected On Brunswick Airport Lease

BY RAHN ADAMS

The Federal Aviation Administration's opinion of a controversial lease agreement between the Brunswick County Airport Commission and the airport's operator should be "in the mail" this week, according to an official with the FAA's Atlanta office.

Safety and Program Development Supervisor Howard Robinson, however, on Monday wouldn't reveal his office's findings concerning the airport commission's lease agreement with Airport Enterprises.

"It's just not appropriate for me to comment until the airport commission is notified," Robinson said.

The FAA review follows a preliminary report last month from the airport commission's lawyer, Grover Gore, who outlined potential problems with the lease. The agreement was approved last December by a 4-2 vote, with Airport Commissioners John Walters and Harold

Hartwig opposing the lease.

The attorney's report was given orally at the commission's meeting in March and in a more detailed, written form at the board's April 20 meeting, according to Gore. He pointed out numerous potential problems with the lease, including:

•The airport commission did not follow its prospectus when it advertised for a fixed-base operator/airport manager;

•An unfair advantage was given to Airport Enterprises over others who bid for the service, and other bidders were treated unfairly;

•The lease possibly violates an \$821,381 grant agreement between the airport commission, Brunswick County and the FAA, as the lease appears to "create a monopoly" in favor of Airport Enterprises;

•Airport Enterprises—and not the airport commission—appears to have possession and control of the

airport, creating a "private airport out of a public airport."

In his report, Gore suggested that the commission had three possible options: to do nothing, start over and "do it right," or negotiate a new lease with Airport Enterprises.

When contacted last week, Airport Enterprises head Harry Gale declined to comment on Gore's report. "I really don't have any comment to make," said Gale.

The FAA began reviewing the lease in February, after the agency received an inquiry last December from Walters. However, the review was later put "on hold" at Walters' request. Robinson said the FAA did not formally investigate Walters' inquiry because it did not allege discrimination against a prospective operator.

Airport Commission Chairman Johnny Vereen said last week the FAA resumed its review of the lease

last month after he met with officials in Atlanta. FAA Program Specialist Juanita Smith said the meeting occurred April 6.

"We were requested to review the lease and provide our comments to the airport commission," Ms. Smith said Monday. "We will just inform them of our findings."

Vereen last week reserved comment on the matter until the commission receives the FAA report. "I want to see the report before I make any comments on it to the board and to the press," Vereen stated.

In February, Robinson noted that the FAA "could say we don't see any problems, or say (the commission is) leasing too much land to the present operator, which could be interpreted as an exclusive lease."

By law, the lease agreement must allow enough space at the airport for other operators besides Airport Enterprises.

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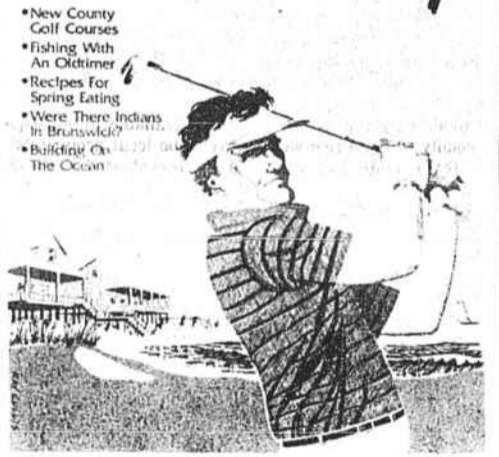
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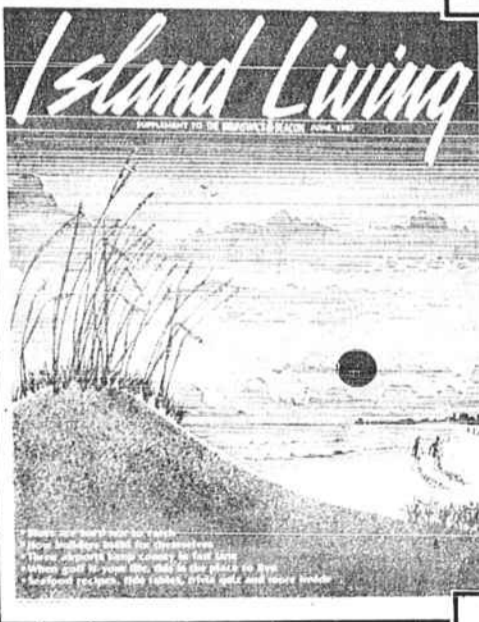
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