

Committee Forming To Explore Regional Sewer Project Idea

BY SUSAN USHER

Officials from three South Brunswick Islands towns agreed last week to form a committee to work with engineers studying the feasibility of a regional sewer system to serve southwestern Brunswick County.

"I think it's going to be a go," said Councilman Bud Scrantom, who will represent Sunset Beach on the committee. "It may be largely on paper for a long time, but at least we're talking and know what everyone else is doing and can work toward the same thing."

"I think that what will make it regional is what we do with the wastewater," he said, particularly the shared interest in use of land application on golf courses.

Representatives of Calabash, Sunset Beach and Ocean Isle Beach, the Sea Trail and Marsh Harbour golf communities and Calabash area landowner John Frink gathered last Wednesday at Sea Trail Plantation at the request of Powell & Associates of North Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Piedmont-Olsen Inc. of Raleigh.

The consulting engineers were recently hired by the towns of Sunset Beach and Calabash to conduct sewer system studies. The firms called the meeting because, as part of those studies, they were asked to explore the possibility of a regional system.

Two representatives of the Institute of Government, Jake Wicker and Fryda Blucstein, outlined options for

establishing a governing body to build and operate a system to serve multiple towns and adjacent unincorporated areas. Having a single governing body could save on overhead and other duplication of costs, they noted.

The engineers pointed out that each of the entities involved have some "immediate need" that could serve as a starting point for discussion.

Sunset Beach Town Administrator Linda Fluegel said she was pleased with the meeting because it was the first time the towns had met to discuss the possibility of working together on a regional sewer system.

At present Ocean Isle is the only town in the southwestern area with a sewer system, which is being expanded to serve the east end of the island. The largest private system is operated by Carolina-Blythe Utilities, division of Burnett Utilities of Charlotte. That system serves Carolina Shores, which is now part of the town of Calabash.

A private effort began about five or six years ago to establish a sewer system in the southwestern section of the county, but a system never materialized. "The problem then was that a lot of us had land that didn't need sewer then," said Dean Walters of Sea Trail Plantation.

"Now we're expanding and we're having to deal with stricter regulations regarding groundwater."

The regulations are needed to maintain groundwater

quality, he said, but make it more difficult for private entities to meet regulatory standards.

Walters said he believes that a regional approach involving the towns is the most advantageous in terms of permit application, funding and management.

Wicker reviewed a number of alternatives for managing a regional system, including contractual arrangements, service district or sanitary district, and the powers available to each for management and financing.

The goal, he said, is to find the most economical and efficient way to manage a sewer service area of a certain size in its current stage of development and planned growth.

"You would be acting as one group to deal with state regulations and local government decision making," he said.

Morris Brookhart of Piedmont-Olsen told the group that "the true advantages (of a regional system) probably won't be evident immediately," but that it was still to their advantage to lay the groundwork early, before facilities are built.

Both Odell Williamson, developer of and utilities commissioner for Ocean Isle Beach, and Ed Gore, Sunset Beach mayor pro tem and a partner in Sea Trail Corp., both said they favor a regional approach.

"I think it is a very forward movement," said Williamson. "I don't mean taking in areas where it will be 100 years before there are houses built, but the areas that have master plans."

"I wouldn't be surprised to see more funds available for water and sewer system development from the federal government because it's rougher out there for some of us than it seems on the surface."

While agreeing, Gore cautioned that if the committee members "can't move together in a timely fashion" toward a regional entity, some participants might have to move ahead with projects of their own.

Brunswick County was not represented at the meeting. County Engineer Robert Tucker had been invited but could not attend because he was out of town.

One of the engineers with Powell & Associates, Joseph Tombro, said the county's present role in the regional effort appears to be "passive".

James Billups, also of Powell & Associates, urged the towns to use their influence to try to involve the county since a "significant portion of the population" would be involved.

However, County Manager David Clegg has said the county is focusing its efforts on water system construction.

Thousands Get Surprise Tax Notices

BY TERRY POPE

Persons who failed to list vehicles on their 1991 property tax notices are being hit with a \$100 fine in addition to late listing penalties.

The Brunswick County Tax Department mailed about 8,000 letters last week to county residents who own vehicles or utility trailers they did not list with the tax office.

For the first time, a new computer system allows the county to track down property owners who fail to list their vehicles to avoid paying taxes, said Tax Administrator Boyd Williamson.

The program was ordered by County Manager David Clegg to help in the collection of lost tax revenues to the county.

Automobiles, recreational vehicles and utility trailers worth an estimated \$29 million in Brunswick County have not been listed, said Williamson. The county loses between \$200,000 and \$300,000 in tax revenues each year on those vehicles, he estimated.

One cent on the county property tax rate of 68.5 cents per \$100 in valuation generates about \$300,000 in revenues.

"We're mainly looking for the people who habitually and continuously fail to deal with the

tax office on ad valorem taxes," said Williamson. "They're out there, and we know it. This is the only way we can make believers out of them."

Three years ago, the N.C. General Assembly passed a law making it a \$100 fine on each vehicle for persons caught not registering them with the local tax department.

For the past two years, a notice was printed on the back of county tax statements threatening abusers with a \$100 fine, said Williamson.

"We had not been able to follow through with the \$100 fine," said Williamson. "We knew it would be an administrative nightmare."

The county tax office in Bolivia was busier than normal Monday morning from persons responding to the notices they received in the mail last week. The phones were busy and small lines had formed at the counter.

"We're going to hear from about all 8,000 of these letters," said Williamson.

The letters list vehicles that were registered with the N.C. Department of Motor Vehicles in the person's name but were not listed for tax purposes with the county tax office.

It gives the owner 30 days to reply, to indicate why they should not be fined \$100 for making a false statement on their vehicle registration form and why they should not be billed for the late taxes.

The taxes levied and the fines are collectable

through garnishment of wages and attachment of bank accounts, the letter states.

"A disproportionate number of these letters are coming back to us," said Williamson. "That leads us to believe that this is a transient population that moved in, got tags and have moved on. We have no way to track them."

Williamson believes his office will collect around \$100,000 in fines and another \$100,000 in late taxes from the crackdown.

After the 30-day review period is over, those who are found to have failed to pay taxes due the county will receive bills in December, several weeks before the Jan. 5 payment due date.

Some people responding Monday indicated the problem arose when vehicles were listed on a husband's tax form or they had just simply overlooked a utility or boat trailer, said Williamson.

Another case showed that a woman had paid just \$23 in taxes in the six years she has lived in Brunswick County. She owns a mobile home and a vehicle, said Williamson.

"Those are the people that I have no sympathy for," said Williamson. "We're working on those situations on a case-by-case basis."

Without the computer program, the warning about a \$100 fine for not listing was "not much more than an idle threat," he said.

But now, he adds, "We're serious about this."



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AND \$100 FINE Dog Sitter Gets Jail Term

A Leland man who left a dog locked inside a mobile home for more than four days was sentenced Monday to 48 hours in jail.

Mike Greco, of Butler's Mobile Home Park, must also pay \$243 to the Brunswick County Animal Control for care of the animal plus a \$100 fine.

Brunswick County District Court Judge David G. Wall sentenced Greco to six months in jail, suspended the sentence and placed him on three years unsupervised probation.

John Crowder, environmental health supervisor for the Brunswick County Health Department, said he was surprised but pleased by the active jail term given to the defendant, who had agreed to baby-sit the dog for its real owners.

"He was actually keeping it (dog) for someone else," said Crowder.

Animal control officers charged Greco with cruelty to animals.

Crowder said the mixed labrador was abandoned inside the mobile home for more than four days without food.

Greco must also serve 48 hours of community service.

The dog, taken to the animal

shelter in Supply, is now healthy and in good condition, said Crowder.

"The owners can now come and get their dog," he said.

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