

COMBINATION PROPOSAL 'UNIQUE'

Turnout Light For First Public Hearing On Sunset Beach Sewer System Plans

BY SUSAN USHER

A proposed combination sewer system/stormwater management plan at Sunset Beach could become a demonstration project because of its unique approach, a trio of engineers told a group of 35 people at the local fire station Monday night.

Mayor Mason Barber said he was disappointed at the turnout for the first public hearing on the proposed sewer system because the meeting, which lasted three hours, would have been a way of getting information to a lot of people at one time. It was held at the fire station instead of town hall in anticipation of greater attendance.

Those who did get to ask questions following a one-and-one-half hour overview by consulting engineers Jim Billups and Joseph Tombro of Powell Associates of North Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Phil Smith of Piedmont Olsen Hensley of Raleigh. Questions ranged from how the system would be funded to its potential impact on the coastal environment.

The engineering consultants are recommending the town proceed with a new master stormwater management plan concurrent with development of a sewer system, but also even if plans for a sewer system are scratched. The stormwater plan would address not only management to ensure that future development of any size does not contribute to additional water pollution, but also provides for remediation.

One proposal, for example, suggests tying emptied septic tanks on the island to provide individual site stormwater control.

Offset Increased Run-Off
The stormwater management system addresses a key concern raised by agencies that must issue permits for a municipal sewer system: control of increased surface run-off that typically occurs with increased density of development accommodated by sewerage. Run-off is considered a major source of water pollution.

While the plan cannot be implemented throughout the entire 15,000-acre Sunset Beach-Calabash sewer study planning area, it can be put in place in Sunset Beach, the mayor said after the meeting. "It will include the island, and that's the most sensitive area, the area they're most concerned about," he said. Billups said the projected cost of \$10.5 million is conservatively high, and will decline if Sunset Beach and neighboring Calabash join together to develop a regional treatment plant.

The actual cost of the system is estimated at \$11.5 million, but the town's net cost to the town would be closer to \$10.5 million after reimbursements from developers for development-related costs. Of that

sum, \$9 million would be needed initially, and another \$1.5 million within one to two years.

Mayor Barber said a bond referendum would be major source of revenues for construction of the system.

Island resident Sue Weddle's comment was typical. "If there is an environmental need for sewers, then I'm for sewers," she said.

First, she wants evidence to that effect, she said, such as additional coliform bacteria samples taken during summer Turnou, when homes on the island with septic tanks designed to serve four-member households must handle waste from crowds of eight or more people all season long.

Responded Councilman Bud Scramton, "To answer your question, we're going to do it."

To Serve 1,400 Initially
System cost estimates are tentative and are based on providing service initially to a large customer base, approximately 1,400 units, including all areas within the town limits, plus several areas outside town.

A wall map showed lines extending through the island of Sunset Beach, the Maples, Sugar Sands and immediate Jones/Byrd Clubhouse areas of Sea Trail and extending out to Seaside Center and Seaside North developments, then on to Old Georgetown Road and Sea Village development and beyond.

As proposed, wastewater from Sunset Beach—and possibly from Calabash and surrounding areas—would be piped to a 1 million-gallon-per-day treatment facility northwest of Sea Trails Plantation. The plant would be expected to initially treat an annual wastewater flow of 194,910,000 gallons, with a summertime peak of 855,700 gallons per day.

Sunset Beach does not know yet, for example, if it will be building a treatment facility by itself or in conjunction with Calabash and possibly other municipalities.

That will affect the size, type and cost of system built, Tombro indicated, as will the funds available for construction.

Pursuing Farmers Home Dollars

At present, the town is vigorously pursuing a Farmers Home Administration grant and should know within approximately 30 days if it is eligible to apply. Then it must undertake a comprehensive environmental impact study and other application steps. Tombo said the study should take only 90 to 120 days, because the firm has already gathered substantial data to support the town's application.

With large retirement populations on fixed incomes, said the engineers, both Sunset Beach and Calabash meet income eligibility levels, based on average household incomes reported on the last census. The grant would be used to bring the monthly service cost down to an "affordable" level, typically \$16 to \$18 per month.

With no grant funding and a Farmers Home Administration loan at 6 percent for 40 years, the town's annual debt retirement for construction would be approximately \$697,830, according to the sewer study. Maintenance and operation is expected to cost another \$250,000 a year. If the town didn't charge an impact fee, up-front, that would put the cost at \$29.22 a month for a household using about 200 gallons of town water per day. The figure could drop lower if an impact fee were charged and/or Farmers Home grant or other grant money obtained.

One point to be resolved: How fully developed the island of Sunset Beach actually is. While only 60 percent to 70 percent built out, the entire island is slated for development.

Federal funds can be used to provide sewer service to existing development, but not to new development under the terms of the Barrier Islands Act. The act is part of federal policy that discourages development of barrier islands and other areas in the 100-year floodplain by not providing funds for that purpose.

For that same reason, said Tombro, Farmers Home "isn't going to let you develop increased density in the flood zone."

The engineers contend that plating of the island is the equivalent of development.

"With no land left on the island to subdivide, the provision of sewer service should not serve to support any new development of undeveloped land," their report suggested.

Engineers are also exploring other sources of funding, such as state and federal grants for a demonstration project, given the uniqueness of the combination sewer study/stormwater management plan approach, apparently the first of its kind in the state if pursued. The stormwater plan is expected to add another 5 percent to the total cost of the effort.

Before town residents vote on whether to fund a sewer system with a bond referendum, a detailed financial plan must be prepared.

Golf Course Irrigation
Based on the expectation that new state regulations allowing land application of effluent on golf courses are approved next month, treated effluent would be pumped to surrounding golf courses for use in irrigation.

Tombras said contracts with golf courses would be developed through negotiation, since the arrangement would be mutually beneficial.

The town has very limited options for wastewater disposal, he said, and the golf courses need the water, but must make expensive changes to accommodate use of effluent. These include building of holding ponds for storage of effluent when rainfall is adequate for irrigation.



STAFF PHOTO BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

AMERICAN FLAGS flap in the Easter breeze, welcoming visitors to Ocean Isle Beach. Mayor Betty Williamson (right) and Janet Sanders planted the ensigns as part of a causeway beautification project.

Surprise Display Greet Residents And Visitors To Ocean Isle Beach

Residents and holiday visitors to Ocean Isle Beach (OIB) were astonished last weekend as they approached the bridge to the island. Two columns of fluttering American flags lined both sides of the causeway, the red, white and blue flashing atop tall silver poles. Forty-four of them, spaced 20 feet apart, turned the area into a military parade ground.

This beautification project was undertaken by Mayor Betty Williamson and Town Commissioner Janet Sanders, both serving on the beautification committee for the town's Property Owners' Association. They were "planting" flags at 6:30 Friday morning, with the help of Dave Harrell and Police Officer Danny Hunter.

"It's a joint town and property owners' project," Williamson explained. "We try to do something every year to beautify the causeway. We wanted it to be special for the holidays."

The flags will fly, Williamson said, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on every holiday weekend throughout the year, but will remain in place daily throughout the week of July 4.

Most of the \$1,700 cost is being borne by the POA, according to Williamson.

"We started beautifying the causeway about five years ago, adding something every year," she said, pointing to the Christmas tree planted last year, and crepe myrtle bushes planted three years ago. The area has been landscaped on both sides of the highway and planted with flowers and flowering trees.

This year's contribution is the most spectacular, the two women agreed.

"We've been hearing reactions all day," Sanders said. "One person said tears came to her eyes; another said he was shocked."

Williamson reported a woman telling her, "It makes me feel so special," to which the mayor responded, "You ARE special, and that's why we've done this. It's a way of saying Ocean Isle Beach is a very special place to visit."

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