

# Parks and recreation enrich Belmont residents

By ALAN HODGE

All work and no play makes Jack, Jane, and/or off-spring dull folks. Thankfully, Belmont has always had plenty of places to recreate in the past, and hopefully the future will hold more of the same.

The crown jewel of the Belmont Parks and Recreation system is Stowe Park. Located right in the heart of downtown Belmont, this 10-acre oasis of relaxation opened on July 4, 1951 to much fanfare. Amusements included a full-sized Ferris wheel, musical carousel, concession stand, and stage where shows by such luminaries as 'the singing cowboy' Fred Kirby could perform.

Topping it all off was a miniature train that gave kids a ride around the park, across a bridge and through a tunnel. Dignitaries that rode the train on opening day included Robert L. Stowe, Jr., Miss Belmont Novella Cloninger, former N.C. gubernator R. Gregg Cherry and Harley B.

Gaston, Sr.

Within six years of its opening Stowe Park had seen around 150,000 visitors. All was not rosy though, since some folks objected to the noise the merrymaking caused. Besides the ruckus factor, the fact that the park was open to African-Americans only on Tuesdays was another source of debate. The ensuing protests and rows caused the park to close in 1965.

In 1978, Stowe Park was given to the City of Belmont by Robert L. Stowe, Jr. minus the rides and train. Nonetheless it was a green space in the city that would not only be reborn as a recreation area, but as a gathering place for festivals and celebrations such as the annual GaribaldiFest.

Today, things are looking up even more for Stowe Park. Plans are in the works for a 900 sq. ft. dedicated restroom and concession building paid for in part by money raised by the Belmont Rotary Club. Other upgrades the park will see includes



Stowe Park in Belmont

renovation of the upper athletic field with lights and drainage improvements, a sand volleyball court, and a new 30x60-foot picnic shelter.

Besides the Stowe Park project, Belmont Parks and Recreation Department is also in the midst of a 10-year plan to improve current recreational facilities and

build more for the city's growing population. The road map for this journey was drawn up by Charlotte-based consultants Site Solutions in 2003.

The study suggested improvements in existing park facilities and where new ones need to be built. Ideas included jogging trails, an equestrian trail, a new field

for football and soccer, baseball/softball field, swimming pool, several miles of walking trails and a new 30-50 acre community park near N.C. Hwy. 273. Also on the wish list was a 25,000 sq. ft. community building to replace the aging J. Paul Ford building on Woodlawn Avenue where Belmont Parks and Recreation currently has its offices.

An especially interesting prospect is construction of a park on the Catawba River near the Hwy. 29/74 bridge and Catawba Street. The park could feature a bridge to an island in the cove as well as fishing and picnicking areas.

At the time of the Site Solutions report, the cost of everything they said the city needed was around \$9 million.

Recent approval of a \$235,894 grant from the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources will help with the bills. The grant had been approved in August 2005. The most the City of Belmont

could have asked for with that particular grant was \$250,000.

Besides recreational opportunities in the city of Belmont, the U.S. National Whitewater Center project under construction across the Catawba River will not only give local folks an outlet for their energies, but put \$35 million into the local economy as well. The park is also expected to create several hundred jobs directly or indirectly.

At a press conference held Nov. 2, 2005 in Belmont, Whitewater Park officials laid out plans and projections for the place.

"People will come from all over the Southeast," Whitewater Park director Jeff Wise said. "It will be an exciting, vibrant place."

Besides a man-made whitewater rapids river, the center will also have over 11 miles of trails for hiking and biking, a 20,000 sq. ft. lodge with restaurant and a retail shop, and a boathouse on the Catawba for kayaking, fishing and canoeing.

## Expanding schools to meet needs

By ALAN HODGE

Like the lady who lived in a shoe, local schools have so many children they don't know what to do. But officials are trying to figure out a solution.

Taking the number of homes coming to Belmont in the foreseeable future, local schools of all grade levels could need space for as many as 1,200 new students.

Relief for over crowded schools in the area could come in the form of a bond referendum. On Jan. 26, Gaston County Board of Commissioners voted to put \$148.7 million worth of education bonds on the November ballot. Gaston College has asked for \$23.7 million, and Gaston County Schools is looking for \$125 million.

If the bonds pass, six new schools are slated to be built in high growth areas, including Belmont. The breakdown of proposed schools is as follows: one new high school, two middle schools and three elementary schools at sites still to be determined.

"If I had my choice of a site for a new high school it would be in the middle of I-85 between Belmont and Mount Holly," said School Board Member Kevin Collier who lives in Mount Holly.

A preliminary search for new school building locations in Gaston County turned up 490 potential sites for elementary schools, 152 for middle schools and 31 for high schools.

Some people feel failure to pass the bonds will send a negative message to firms and families who are eyeing the area.

"Folks will turn away if the bonds don't pass," said Belmont Central Elementary Principal Julius Barkley.

The issue of overcrowding schools isn't a new or surprising issue. In late 2005, Gaston County Schools set up a Capacity Committee to study the impact increasing population numbers currently have and will have on the local educational system. The research and report, headed up by the GCS System's Operation Director Kristine Spivey, pointed to a "capacity dilemma."

Some schools are already getting a relief from the space issue. Construction of a new classroom addition has been completed at Catawba Heights Elementary. Building renovation projects at Page Elementary and Belmont Central are underway with projected completion dates of Fall 2006.

Page Elementary principal Mark Fisher says the new building on his campus will have nine classrooms - enough for around 200 more students on top of the existing 250.

# INFRASTRUCTURE

## nuts & bolts of growth

By ALAN HODGE

No doubt there are many pipe dreams connected with Belmont's explosive growth and a lot of them are of the sewer and water variety.

Since folks these days are loathe to carry water from a well for cooking and washing, or make a trip to the 'house of office', the increased need for water/sewer infrastructure is at the top of the list of things Belmont is facing.

Currently, Belmont provides around 9,000 individuals with water and sewer service. The water treatment plant on 10th Street cleanses 10 million gallons per day of drinking water and five million gallons per day of wastewater.

A Local Water Supply Plan study done by the city in 2002 showed an average of 2.5 million gallons per day of water use with a maximum of 4.0 million gallons per day. Wastewater flow figures were 1.8 million gallons per day.

An important factor in considering current use is the fact that since 2002 several industrial water users have gone out of business or left town, thereby reducing to some degree the amount of water the city has been selling- and the amount of revenue Belmont has been taking in from those fees. In April 2004 the Belmont city council approved a special rate for heavy industrial users in an attempt to keep companies such as Spartan Dyers from pulling up stakes.

One of the biggest developments in Belmont's infrastructure are the new water and sewer lines going down South Point Road. In August 2004, an 800-foot section of sewer pipe was laid from the new South Point Ridge subdivision and tied in with an

existing line on Stowe Rd. South Point Ridge was under construction at that time and projected to have 200 homes when completed. It's located right behind South Point High School. A report done by the engineering consultants ARCADIS estimated nearly 77,000 gallons of wastewater would come from the development each day.

In November 2004 work started on a 12-inch water line from near Henry's Chapel Road south to the upscale Reflection Pointe gated subdivision. The line, which was completed late last year, is around 3 miles long and cost nearly \$2 million and was paid for by the developers. Also part of the equation is the possibility of a one million gallon water tank at the corner of Henry's Chapel Road and South Point Road. Cost of the tank will be \$1.8 -2 million.

But Reflection Pointe is just the tip of the iceberg as far as the future of development on South Point Road goes. The Belmont Peninsula Water and Wastewater Master Service Plan done by ARCADIS had some interesting figures. The study estimated that by the year 2055, the entire South Point Peninsula, bordered by the South Fork and Catawba rivers, on the east, west and south and the city proper on the north, would be totally 'built out' by the year 2055.

Based on an average population rise of 3 percent a year starting in 2003, the 4,600 undeveloped acres down that way would see as many as two dwelling units per acre. With at least three people in each household and most likely at least two vehicles the mathematical equation means a lot of people needing a lot of water and sewer service. To whit—by

build out in 2055 the peninsula alone would need over 6 million gallons of water every day. Nearly twice what the entire City of Belmont uses today.

Besides water lines, sewer pumping stations will also be needed on the South Point Peninsula. ARCADIS recommended a dozen developer-built wastewater pumping stations along the western and southern side of the peninsula. A city built regional pumping station was also proposed.

Besides development on the peninsula, another subdivision in town will call for beefing up of the city's infrastructure. Located on the site of the former Eagle Mill on Eagle Road, the Eagle Park development is slated to be a mixed use development with around 150 single family lots, a like number of townhouses, and a mix of retail and other living spaces.

The development is expected to flow an average of about 120,000 gallons per day of wastewater.

To help process the flow from all those houses, the City of Belmont is upgrading its wastewater treatment plant with a new administrative office building. The eight-decade-old Water Treatment Plant is also getting attention in terms of repair and renovation.

City of Belmont Public Works director David Isehour sees challenges ahead but thinks planning carefully can address them.

"One of our goals for the future is getting gravity fed sewer service to all citizens along South Point Road," said Isehour. "Another will be construction of the water tower. The land has been purchased and engineering drawings completed. Hopefully, construction can begin next year."

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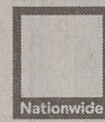
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