

County seeks water tower compromise

by Heather J. Smith

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The controversial plan to build an elevated water tower in Weddington earned a second look by the Union County Board of Commissioners.

Members of the public implored the commission to consider a ground-level storage alternative during the board's Tuesday night meeting.

Last month, the Union County Public Works department got approval from the Weddington Town Council to build a 198-foot, 1.5 million gallon water tower at 247 Providence Road South. Complaints of low water-pressure in Weddington and Marvin prompted the county to plan a new water tower.

Residents around the proposed site oppose the tower. Most people who live closest to the site have well water, so they will not benefit from the county's improvement. The tower would be an eye-sore and slash property values of nearby homes, speakers said.

They asked the county to look at a more expensive, but less noticeable option. So far, county planners have not considered ground-level tanks because it would cost \$1.6 million more than an elevated tank.

Speakers pointed to a precedent set earlier by the county when it capped the Twelve-Mile Creek water treatment plant after the residents of newly constructed housing developments complained about the smell. The county spent extra funds to quell complaints, even though odor was a problem well before residents moved there.

Several reasons caused the county to plan for elevated tanks, Union County Public Works Director Ed Goscicki told the board. Elevated tanks create water pressure by storing millions of gallons hundreds of feet off the ground. The downward pressure forces water through pipes at varying strength, depending on the water demand and elevation of the tank.

County planners presented an earlier board of commissioners the choice of either elevated or ground-level. Commissioners chose the least expensive option, and planning staff began designing an elevated tank.

Residents asked the board to build the tower further away from residential areas, but that causes problems, also. Elevated tanks cannot be put anywhere, Goscicki said. The location must have the right ground elevation to produce the proper pressure.

Ground-level alternatives are possible, but cost more and require more work to maintain. A pump station that runs constantly would be required to create the same water pressure an elevated tank would create by design.

The project is an estimated 6 months away from breaking ground on construction, which gives commissioners time to weigh options. It is unlikely, however, that county can change its design without taking some steps backward.

“Right now, we have a zoned approval from Weddington for an elevated storage tank based on a very detailed design that we brought to them,” Goscicki said. “If this board came back and said we want to do a ground-level storage tank, we would probably have to go back to Weddington to go through this whole process again.”

If the county does change to a ground-level tank, it is uncertain if Weddington or the county is responsible for the additional construction cost.

Projects like the tank would be paid for with money made and saved by the self-sustaining water system enterprise fund, not taxpayer dollars. Water customers paid into the pool that would then be used to fund the tower construction.

With \$28 million in the water system enterprise fund, Commissioner Kim Rogers said the county should consider the public's favored alternative. Most Monroe residents and county residents using wells would not pay for the extra cost.

"We do have other options and just because we can doesn't mean that we should and it doesn't make it right," Rogers said.

That sounds like plenty of money in the enterprise fund, but there are many water and sewer projects depending on those funds, Commissioner Todd Johnson said.

"While there is a lot of money in that account, there's a lot of projects we have coming down the pike that we have to be prepared to fund," Johnson said.

Commissioner Jonathan Thomas asked if it was fair for 40,000 county water customers to pay for improvements enjoyed by only 10,000 customers. Customers are spread out from Indian Trail, Stallings, parts of Wingate and Marshville, and unincorporated areas in the southern and eastern part of Union County.

"I believe we have to be fair across the board," Thomas said. "If this is going to serve a local area, then the cost sharing should be in the local area."

Commissioners chose to continue with current plans for an elevated tank, but will fully research the cost of ground-level tanks and ask if the Weddington Town Council will contribute to any additional cost.

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