

Water and Sewer Task Force report leaves crucial questions unanswered

by Jeri Gray

The Wake Water and Sewer Task Force—a group appointed by the county commissioners nearly two years ago to study the county's water and sewer policy—made its report and recommendations to the Wake County Board of Commissioners on August 31. The commissioners adopted the task force's recommendations on September 8.

You will recall that the county's policy has been that municipalities are responsible for providing water and sewer and that the county's role should be limited to providing some funding for system interconnections, line extensions, and loans to municipalities in very limited situations—mostly for economic development reasons. The charge given the Wake Water and Sewer Task Force was to find the most efficient way to provide water and sewer for Wake County's growing population and make recommendations as to what the county's role should be in implementing the system judged to be best.

As I predicted at the outset, the task force determined that the most efficient way to provide water and sewer in Wake County is to consolidate all current systems into one interconnected management entity. Yes, I am saying "I told you so," but I'm not claiming a great accomplishment. Given current engineering and economic thinking, it was entirely predictable that the study would find great economies of scale in the one-system scenario. Just like an electric or natural gas utility, a water and sewer utility can (according to current thinking) provide service more cheaply if many people use the same facilities and the cost of the facilities is spread over the larger population. The study claims that consumers/taxpayers in Wake County can save \$538 million over the next 30 years on facilities that would be needed under the one-system scenario as opposed to the current every-town-for-itself system. It's hard to argue with that kind of predicted savings.

The task force recommended that the county take on the role of facilitator, doing whatever it can to encourage municipalities to move toward one county-wide system—first cooperating on water and sewer projects, then coalescing into larger management groups (western Wake under Cary and eastern Wake under Raleigh), and finally melding into one system. It recommended that the county commissioners appoint an "Implementation Task Force" to keep the one-system vision alive, identify water and sewer projects on which municipalities can cooperate, and work with municipalities to convince them to cooperate. The task force recommended that the county commission revise policy

for its small-water and sewer fund to allow it to support feasibility studies for such cooperative projects. Among the first projects the implementation group will promote are the Raleigh/Garner systems merger and building of a water line from the Cape Fear River through Harnett County by Fuquay-Varina and other municipalities in western Wake County.

One thing that is conspicuously absent from the Wake Water and Sewer Task Force's report are recommendations about how we can pay for all the public facilities (treatment plants and distribution/collection systems) that will be needed over the next 30 years. One of the task force's charges was to make recommendations on funding alternatives, and the task force heard several presentations relating to various ways to fund water and sewer facilities including public-private partnerships. Early in the process I was convinced we would see a recommendation not only for county-wide consolidation but also for privatization—or at least private operation of the public system. There, I was wrong, for whatever reason. There is not one word in the final report I about privatization. In fact, there is not one word about financing. There was also talk early in the process of a bond issue to capitalize a county revolving fund that would loan money to municipalities to construct water and sewer facilities, but, for whatever reason, there is no recommendation for a bond issue.

Not only has the public financing issue been side-stepped, but the one sector where money for development of water and wastewater services may be available—non-municipal, that is, private, systems—is portrayed in the report as a threat to public health and the environment and virtually targeted for elimination.

Another thing missing from the task force report is an explanation of how a consolidated water and sewer system will help control and guide growth. While Task Force Chairman John Converse and Planning Director Mike Jennings deny it now (they did in response to one of my comments during a task force meeting), the water and sewer plan was being presented early on as a growth management tool. In an interview with the News & Observer in 1996 (see *Water-line investment proposed*, July 12, 1996), Converse said that the water and sewer plan would "encourage development in areas where it ought to go." The idea put forward was that through the water and sewer task force, "the county and towns would agree on a development plan designating where water and sewer lines

will be built, and in which order." (Also see goals of the water and sewer task force on the county's web site at <http://www.co.wake.nc.us/planning/w&s.htm#Background>.)

The Water and Sewer Task Force never got around to discussing where water and sewer lines will be built and in which order. The "facilities phasing" recommended in the report refers only to when plants must be built in order to provide treatment capacity to meet demand. Several times during task force meetings, I asked when we would get around to discussing municipal extension policies—which determine where water and sewer lines go and in which order. Each time I was told that the county cannot be perceived as trying to dictate growth policy to municipalities, and indeed nothing in the final report addresses municipal extension policies. So, the idea of a county-wide water and sewer plan as a growth management tool has been abandoned, and I want that to be perfectly clear.

Without provisions for affecting municipal extension policy, the water and sewer plan can be only a growth-facilitating tool. However, without recommendations for funding, it can't really be considered a plan. In sum, the \$500,000 water and sewer study was an exercise that resulted in the collection of a lot of good data, a needed analysis of the county's future water and sewer needs given continuation of current growth rates, and one perspective—the big-is-better perspective—on the way to provide the services. I don't think that adoption of the plan by the county commissioners means much. I think that the report leaves a number of crucial questions unanswered and that the discussion about how to provide water and sewer in Wake County will have to continue.

I am very pleased that the recommendations accepted by the commissioners include establishing a task force to develop a county program to address control of polluted storm water, promoting water conservation and reuse, and developing a groundwater resources management program. I hope that the commissioners take action on these recommendations, particularly the recommendations for adoption of a well-head protection program and funding for a cooperative study with the U.S. Geological Survey of the county's groundwater resources. Groundwater has played an important role in Wake County's development and can continue to be a valuable resource if we pay attention to it, protect it, and make plans for utilizing it.