

## Water and Sewer Task Force Update: Recommendations to Commissioners probable in August by Jeri Gray

In August, the task force that has been searching for the best way to provide water and sewer services for Wake County will make its recommendations to the County Commissioners. At a joint meeting of the Wake County Commission and the Wake Water and Sewer Task Force, the task force will recommend that municipalities in the county move toward consolidation of water and sewer facilities and management, with an ultimate goal of having only one publicly owned system in the county by the year 2025. The task force will also make recommendations for implementing the consolidation recommendations and for a county revolving water and sewer fund.

It should be noted that the Wake County Commissioners do not have the authority to order consolidation of water and sewer systems. The commission can, however, encourage consolidation by continuing to support a task force or other "implementation" group to facilitate negotiations among municipalities, by funding water and sewer projects more generously than in the past, and by funding only water and sewer projects that are compatible with consolidation plans.

### **Back ground**

You will recall that in November 1996, upon recommendation of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, the Wake County Commissioners appointed a Wake Water and Sewer Task Force, charged it with making recommendations to revise the county's water and sewer policy, and provided it \$500,000 to hire consultants to help with the study.

Up to now, 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).

Over the last 20 months, the task force has been studying all aspects of water supply and wastewater disposal in Wake County. The main question the task force has been considering is: "Is there a better way to provide water and wastewater services in Wake County than the arrangement that is currently in place?"

Two consulting firms—CH2M Hill, an engineering firm, and Raftelis Consulting Group, a financial firm—have gathered and presented comprehensive data on:

- ◆ current and projected population for each municipality and the county as a whole,
- ◆ current and projected water and wastewater treatment demand,
- ◆ currently available water supply sources and possible future sources,
- ◆ current and needed water treatment and wastewater treatment facilities,
- ◆ current and projected environmental regulations that will affect water and wastewater provision, and
- ◆ scenarios depicting the relative costs if water and sewer services continue to be provided by each municipality and if systems consolidate into four, two, or

one county-wide system.

After hearing months of data and analysis, the task force, a stakeholder group, the county staff, and the consultants in April completed forms evaluating each scenario. Evaluations represented each individual's perception of how each scenario ranked in terms of (1) quality of service, (2) timeliness of service, (3) environmental soundness, (4) cost effectiveness, (5) compatibility with other elements of the county's comprehensive plan, and (6) implementation considerations.

Every group evaluated the current way of providing water and sewer as poor. Every group evaluated the two-system scenario as good. Every group except the consultants evaluated the one-system scenario as superior to all others. The consultants rated the two-system scenario as superior.

These overall evaluations should not be taken to mean that every municipality and every individual would benefit equally under the one-system scenario to be recommended. Generally, Raleigh and Cary and their residents would share with smaller municipalities the dividends they are now earning (in the form of better service and lower rates) from their long-term investment in water and sewer facilities. Some inducement must be found for Raleigh and Cary to share with other communities. This will be one of the main implementation issues.

Other implementation issues—to be discussed by the task force at a July 15 meeting—will be discussed in my next report.