

Article published Apr 29, 2007

Developers give input on sewer repairs **Group advocates public-private cooperation on issue**

A newly formed group of commercial developers says it wants Wilmington and New Hanover County officials to provide some clarity on their sewer policies as they move forward with repairs and measures to reduce flows through the troubled Northeast Interceptor.

Representatives of Coastal Carolina Tomorrow Inc., which consists of developers of major projects such as Mayfaire, Lumina Station and Autumn Hall, say the group was not formed to advocate for individual projects. Instead, its goal is to provide a voice for the development community and contribute as the city and county continue repairs and negotiations with the state. The city and county are working on a special order by consent agreement, which would hold the governments to an agreed upon timetable for repairs.

"We all understand we'll have to tighten our belts," said Hyman Brody, a co-developer of Mayfaire and a founding member of Coastal Carolina Tomorrow. "What we are looking for is clarity. We just need to know where we are going."

The Group includes: Hyman Brody, Mayfaire; Brian Eckel, Cape Fear Commercial; Joel Tomaselli, Lumina Station; Raiford Trask III, Autumn Hall. Coastal Carolina Tomorrow recommendations:

1. Continue public participation. The city should hold public "State of the NEI Sewer" meetings so all interested residents and stakeholders can be informed on the progress of sewer repairs. Further, the group says all stakeholders should be invited to participate in roundtable discussions with local and state officials on a regular basis during negotiations with the state.

2. Publish accurate flow calculations. The city should provide how much interceptor capacity is available and post it in a public place such as the city Web site. Melanie Cook, the government affairs director for Coastal Carolina Tomorrow, said the group is not seeking a "hard and fast" number but a fluid one that is updated regularly as flows change. Only by determining flows can the city fairly and safely allocate flows to the commercial and residential building industries and the community at large, Cook said.

3. Allow projects already in the pipeline. Projects that have been submitted to the Technical Review Committee - which determines if a project's site plan meets the required standards - should be allowed to continue because they have already made substantial investment into the project, the group says. Developers say they often spend large sums of money on consultants and engineers before they submit a site plan for technical review. Larger projects such as Mayfaire can spend millions, Brody said.

4. Create a review board. The city and county should create a "capacity allocation review board" to ensure "a fair and equitable system" for approving flow, the developers say. That board would have knowledge of the actual available flow in the interceptor and track projects.

5. Develop accurate flow prediction models. The group says commercial structures contribute much less to sewer flows than commonly believed. The

group asked to work with the city and county to create a "re-calibrated" guide to predicting how much additional flow a project would generate.

6. Protect against further spills. The group suggests the city and county negotiate with the state to include in the special order by consent agreement a stipulation that the state would not adopt a "hard" moratorium or seek to expand the moratorium if a future spill happens.

"We shouldn't start back over and get into a panic mode if there is another incident," said Steve Thomas, an engineering consultant with the group.

"Basically, don't scrap the game plan because of one minor incident."

Moving forward

City and county officials say the Coastal Carolina Tomorrow recommendations are being considered. Mayor Bill Saffo said the development industry has legitimate concerns about the state of the sewers.

"Their concerns are what it's going to do to their businesses," he said. "They are like any other citizen: They want to know when we'll get the repairs done."

Meanwhile, the city and county are moving forward with flow reduction measures imposed April 20, which include commercial development restrictions in the interceptor area.

According to the plan, commercial building permits will only be issued until about 128,000 gallons per day of new commercial flow is created. That number represents 80 percent of the average increase of commercial flows during the previous two years. If that level is reached before the state moratorium is lifted, no more building permits will be approved. The work necessary to end the moratorium is expected to be complete in April 2008.

Chris Mazzolini: 343-2223

chris.mazzolini@starnewsonline.com