

# Sewage backup

## Union County's runaway growth could come to screeching halt without more wastewater capacity

By CAROLYN STEEVES

MONROE — Developers looking to build in Union County have been running into a serious roadblock: permits for sewer and water are not easy to come by.

Due to the rapid growth and the inability for infrastructure to keep up, many developers are having trouble securing sewer permits. Drought conditions have also forced a moratorium on water permits. Officials have some ideas for addressing the county's sewer and water needs, but some of the required projects could take up to 15 years.

The problem has already slowed development in what has recently been among the nation's fastest-growing counties.

Union County experienced immense growth and most public officials agree there was too much growth without enough infrastructure to support it. Today county's sewer system is operating at capacity, meaning it cannot safely handle any extra wastewater. Water could be at capacity, but in dry times they are on restriction.

Allan Baucom, chairman of the Union County Board of Commissioners, explained that the reason behind this was "pretty straightforward." He said that, "there have been previous boards and previous paid officials that have allowed the capacity to be utilized without creating additional capacity."

Baucom explained that when he took office in 2006, "I knew there were sewer challenges ... I just didn't know we were absolutely out."

The county's primary wastewater facility, 12 Mile Creek, near Waxhaw, was built in the 1980s, for what was a much-less-populated Union County.

Last year, the state rejected 30 sewer permits for various construction projects around the county, including residential developments, two hospitals and other commercial developments. Sewer space was then allocated to those projects based

SEE BACKUP, PAGE 10

## Backup

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

on a tiered priority plan and so construction on many of those projects has moved forward.

That situation has brought so-far unproven allegations that county officials have approved some projects and rejected others in an unfair manner, resulting in an ongoing federal investigation.

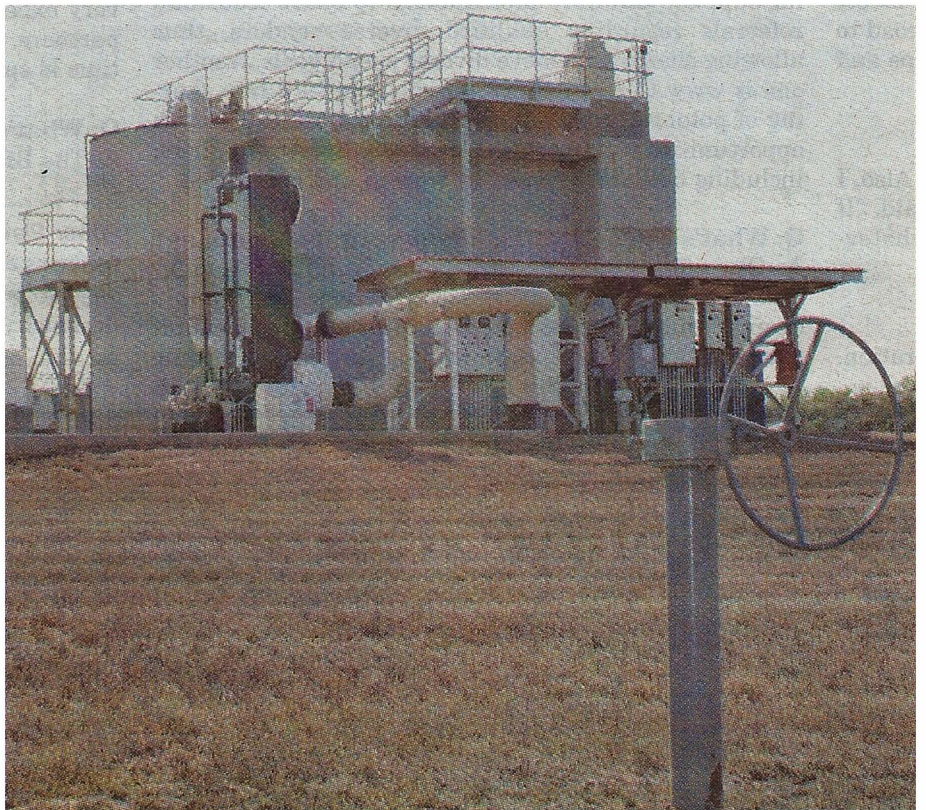
As for water, the current moratorium on permits will last until early August.

Baucom said these problem will take years to overcome. "We were dealt a really negative hand and it's tough to overcome. It's a long-term process," he said. "I don't see any quick fixes here."

In the meantime, county officials are working with neighboring counties and looking at other solutions to get the infrastructure to the point where it is once again able to meet population demands.

Union County Manager Al Greene was hired in April of this year. Since then he has devoted much of his time in office to looking at sewer and water issues. He noted that, "our sewer demand is nowhere near our water demand ... we're probably using on peak summer days, 18 million gallons of water, while we're only using three to 4 million gallons of wastewater (capacity)."

Greene said they are in discussion with neighboring counties to expand nearby water and sewer plants. He noted that these solutions are purely in discussion. They are in discussion with nearby Lancaster County, S.C., about expanding a water and sewer plant that they currently own jointly. Greene said Union County leaders hope that could lead to an additional 9 million gallons a day of wastewater capacity at that plant, but Lancaster County, S.C., about expanding a water and sewer plant that they currently own jointly. Greene said Union County leaders hope that could lead to an additional 9 million gallons a day of



Mecklenburg Times photo by Carolyn Steeves

**UP 12 MILE CREEK:** With aging wastewater treatment facilities, including the 12 Mile Creek Plant near Waxhaw, Union County's ability to handle population growth is running out more quickly than solutions are slated to come online.

## Union County sewer system facts

- About 27,000 customers.
- 5 wastewater treatment plants.
- More than 60 wastewater pumping stations.
- About 500 miles of pipe.
- Rated capacity of about 8 million gallons of water per day.
- Average daily flow of about 4 million gallons of water per day.
- Union Country has contracts with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities and the City of Monroe to handle up to another 5.65 million gallons of water per day. The average daily flow to those facilities is 2 million gallons per day.

wastewater capacity at that plant, but again they are only in discussion.

For water, Greene explained that they are contracted with Anson County to buy up to 4 million gallons a day. But due to Union County's limited infrastructure, they can only buy 1 million gallons a day — they just don't have the pipes to handle more.

There is a similar issue with outsourcing wastewater treatment. They can ship 3 million gallons a day to Mecklenburg County for treatment, but the infrastructure only allows 1 million gallons a day to be shipped. That is something being addressed by the county's public works master plan for water and wastewater, although it won't be fully implemented for more than a decade.

The regional approach being pursued by Union officials as a solution is applauded by state officials, including Rob Krebs, the surface water protection section supervisor for the Department of Environment and Natural Resources' Division of Water Quality. He oversees 11 counties, including Union.

Krebs believes the regional approach is "a great way to do it, because ... it keeps the (new sewer and water) plants cheaper and keeps the current plants operating efficiently and effectively." He pointed out that the larger a system a county has, the fewer fluctuations there are — because small imbalances won't throw the system off.

## Timeline

Greene said some solutions to the capacity problems will take at least two years to bring online. Other components will take 15 years.

Among the shorter term projects is the initiative with Anson County. Because it's further along in design and construction, it could take about two years, he said. Expanding treatment facilities, currently in the discussion phase, would probably take about five year, Greene said.

"Beyond that, for our regional projects, regional water plants, regional wastewater plants, it's hard to say ... to get the parties together ... you could be talking

15 years minimum."

He said that would mean getting everyone together, looking at permits, design, financing, construction and all the other aspects of building a plant.

Some planned developments, such as The Woods at Weddington, have proposed alternative solutions, such as septic tanks or private wastewater plants. However, due to the soil consistency, septic tanks are not feasible in most of Union County. Greene said that further development that depends on public water, as opposed to septic, will be "limited."

"Not that it's at a standstill," he said, but it's definitely limited by the allocation process.

Baucom and Greene agreed that a major concern is the lack of capacity to work with commercial and industrial developments. Baucom said the county "desperately needs the industrial and commercial base."

Greene noted that the tax base in Union County is 85 percent residential and that puts an "unfair burden" on taxpayers. He said it's "absolutely critical that we get more commercial and industrial development, and it's even harder to get that without having proper (sewer and water) allocation for those investments."

## Downturn buys time

The slow economy might actually be a good thing in this instance. Greene noted that due to the economy, he's not sure they would have as much development as they'd had in the recent past, even if the sewer and water permits weren't an issue.

He said the slowing market gives them time to negotiate and work on building their infrastructure, and perhaps by the time the market picks up they'll be in a position to move forward.

Greene said that while this is not a good situation to be in, this is probably the best time to have this problem — while the economy is slowing and demand is down. He said there is "never a good times to have these capacity challenges that we have," but with the current market conditions, now is "probably as good a time as any."