

City extends water and sewer lines to SE Guilford

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In a move that could vastly change the future landscape of Southeast Guilford County, city and county leaders have agreed to extend water and sewer lines into areas where it was previously unavailable, expanding Greensboro's potential service area by up to 50 percent.

The agreement, which took effect July 1, 2007, follows years of changes to a longstanding water/sewer agreement between the two governmental bodies that dated to the 1960s.

"That agreement had been amended time and time again. I think it was on its 17th amendment," explains County Planning Director Greg Niles. "Over that time, maybe some interpretations of it had not always been consistent. You had the county's view of it and the city's."

About three years ago, the city adopted a new growth management strategy. "What they were trying to do is link their future growth plan and their water and sewer policies so that they would be in sync with one another," Greg says. "They asked the county if we could either amend or basically start from scratch with a water/sewer agreement."

The process was about a year and a half in the making when it gained momentum last December.

"It had been going in fits and starts ... and it was just, 'You know what? Time for the rubber to hit the road.'"

For years, the city has designated a "green line" near Forest Oaks as the boundary for water and sewer access. Residents and businesses beyond that were ineligible for water or sewer from the city of Greensboro except under very special circumstances.

"They've taken a hard look, and the end result is their potential service area has expanded by 40 or 50 percent," Greg says of city leaders. "They're now very much south of Woody Mill Road ... almost to Julian. They've really pushed it about as far out as they could go reasonably."

The change does not mean that areas north of Julian, for example, will become immediately available for water. The city has put together a tiered map of areas where there are existing water and sewer lines around, from which it would be fairly easy to extend service.

What the change does mean is that developers, such as Sandy Weathersbee who plans to build a Lowes Foods on Woody Mill Road, will now have the option of accessing the city's water and sewer lines. Sandy bought 45 acres to build a grocery store with no guarantee that he would get such access. It was a gamble that has now paid off.

"I believed it would come, and I'm thankful it came as soon as it did," he says.

“There were a lot of political people saying it won’t happen until five or six years from now. And there were people saying it will never happen, period. Then all of a sudden, in January the draft came out, and I said, ‘Good gosh, this is amazing. We’re included in this, as is another 3,000 acres in Southeast Guilford County that was not included before this recent agreement.’”

Banking on the chance that the drafted agreement he saw in January would be approved, Sandy began expanding his plans to include a “town center” featuring retail offices, high-end luxury multi-family housing units and an assisted living facility. He now has an additional 15 acres under contract and hopes to someday own the 90-acre block bounded by Woody Mill Road, N.C. Highway 421, Hagan Stone Park Road and Liberty Road.

“I was just waiting for it to happen,” Sandy says. “The political pressure, the economy, the geography, the completion of Randleman Dam ... sooner or later, Guilford County is going to have to grow Southeast and not Northwest. And somehow it just happened sooner than I guessed.”

Sandy has asked the county for a feasibility study to determine how it will let him connect to the sewer lines. He thinks the county’s recommendations will come back in six months.

“It’s not a simple process,” he says. “There’s a lot of regulatory approval at both the city level, the county level and at the state level, well beyond my control. I just have to respond to it, deal with it and play within those parameters.” He thinks the entire process of building the grocery store will take about three years.

Greg says the water/sewer agreement “is going to require an awful lot of cooperation between the county and city to make sure it works.

“I’ll be the first one to say I feel for that first developer or two who walks through the door ... because we’re still trying to figure out all the logistics, and a lot of it’s going to be a little trial and error. We’ve got a little bit of a road map to help them through the process, and they’ve got our commitment that we’re going to work real hard to make it as painless as possible.”

One component of the agreement that generated a lot of discussion between city and county leaders, Greg says, was the provision that if a party comes forward and requests city water and sewer, that party has to meet all city development standards.

“We’ve built into that agreement some moderating language,” so it could be waived in some cases, he says. But “the idea is that as the city does grow and annexes these properties into it, that they will look, feel and conform to city standards.”

He points out that just because access to Greensboro’s utilities is available does not mean a land owner has to use it.

“It’s expensive to run water and sewer on the private side, and they have to [decide]: Is an extra dwelling or unit an acre, or two units an acre, worth the cost of meeting all the city standards as well. It’s not mandatory. People do have the choice. They can continue to develop on well and septic or community wells or alternative treatment systems, but if they go the municipal route, that’s where the agreement kicks in with the terms and conditions.”

As for the big picture, the agreement could significantly affect the density of development in Southeast Guilford County.

That’s because construction on well and septic tanks is limited to the soil conditions on a

piece of property. Land has to pass a “perc” test, to see how well the soil percolates and absorbs water to be dissipated into the septic field.

“That’s why you tend to see a lot of larger lot subdivisions ... that’s due to soil conditions, particularly in the Southeast [part of the county],” Greg says.

“With the water/sewer agreement, the city is looking at more urban densities. One dwelling an acre, to send police and fire and solid waste collections and all those others, it’s an inefficient design for them. They would prefer greater densities. They’d like to see at least three units an acre.

“If you’ve got a tract of land that was not eligible that all of a sudden is eligible, it’s gone from potentially one unit an acre to potentially three units an acre, perhaps, if it’s even closer into the city, four, five or six units an acre. So it really could change the landscape out there in unincorporated Guilford County.”