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NEWS ARTICLE: Gainesville Times on November 12, 2011

South Hall sewer expansion on the way Improvements to make facility cost-effective

Sewer hearing

What: Public hearing for Spout Springs Water Reclamation Facility improvements
When: 5-7 p.m. Thursday
Where: Bill Williams Conference Room, third floor of the Joint Administration Building, 300 Henry Ward Way, Suite 301, Gainesville
Contact: Ken Rearden, public works and utilities director, at krearden@hallcounty.org or 770-531-6800.

The nation's economic downturn seems to have had one positive outcome on South Hall County: It has helped government leaders put sewer plans together without pressures of residential and commercial development.

Oakwood City Manager Stan Brown remembers the boom days before the collapse and having to "work like gangbusters" to keep up with infrastructure needs.

"If anything, we're now ahead of the game," he said.

Oakwood, Flowery Branch and Hall County all are moving along with plans to increase sewer capacity through the region, dotted by subdivisions and a few commercial centers.

There is plenty of developable land, and that's the thing that Ken Rearden, Hall County's public works and utilities director, keeps in mind.

"Gwinnett is practically built out, so we're next in line, the way I look at it," he said. "And South Hall is where the growth will start."

Hall County is planning a public hearing for 5-7 p.m. Thursday on planned improvements to the Spout Springs Water Reclamation Facility on Spout Springs Road. The meeting will wrap up a 30-day public comment period on the project.

Hall is applying for a state Environmental Protection Division permit to allow discharging treated sewage into Lollis Creek, which runs in the Oconee River Basin.

The 18-inch, 2,000-foot line would run from the facility to Lollis Creek, which cuts through the county-owned site.

The move would allow the county to stop using sprayfields to discharge water, a labor-intensive task. To comply with permit limits and address odor control, new equipment will be built, including an odor control system, aeration system upgrades, an ultraviolet disinfection system, a new chemical feed system and the sewer pipes.

"These improvements are expected to make the (facility) more cost-effective in the long run, and we'll be treating the water to a higher standard," Rearden said. "This is a benefit for the taxpayers and the environment."

The project will cost \$2.75 million, with funding coming from the county's 1 percent special purpose local option sales taxes.

One area resident, Phyllis Mercer, is not so keen on the county's plans.

"While there is concern about the financial aspect of this project, there is also concern about the impact to our communities," she said. "Lollis Creek is a small slow-flowing creek (that) feeds into the Mulberry River, which flows through my community, Village at Deaton Creek.

"And residents have no desire for this wastewater to be routed into our community streams with possible environmental impact."

The reclamation operation is designed to process 1.6 million gallons of sewer per day but is permitted at 750,000 gallons. It may be a while before the extra capacity is needed.

"There's a big service area in South Hall that's unsewered," Rearden said. "To make plans for growth, we wanted to be able to control that growth with our operation of this system."

The county bought the plant, which is 8 years old, in January 2008. Previously, it was owned by Reunion and Sterling on the Lake subdivisions, with Village at Deaton Creek later buying in, Rearden said.

Hall has a sewer network in South Hall featuring two pump stations and pipes leading to the Gainesville sewer system.

"We have planned for not only utilizing and growing this plant to serve some of this southern basin, but to take the flow from Deaton Creek and Reunion and run it up to this infrastructure we built up to Gainesville's Flat Creek wastewater treatment plant," Rearden said.

Oakwood and Flowery Branch are players in South Hall sewer, as well.

Oakwood, which doesn't operate a system, has agreements with Gainesville, Flowery Branch and Hall County on providing sewer to different parts of the town, particularly along the commercially rich Mundy Mill Road, one of the town's main arteries.

Also, in a \$2.1 million project, Oakwood is installing a force main line on Ga. 53/Winder Highway to Jackson County, connecting with the Braselton sewer system.

In a separate job related to the same project, work is under way on a \$1.1 million pump station on Martin Road, off Winder Highway.

Brown said he expects the project will be completed by the end of this year, but "we're on hold until Braselton completes its gravity line."

He expects the city will begin moving sewer flows to Braselton by early 2013.

Ultimately, as part of an agreement between the two cities, Oakwood would receive as much as 2.5 million gallons per day in sewer capacity from Braselton.

Flowery Branch received a five-year permit renewal this month from the Georgia Environmental Protection Division to continue operating a small sewer plant at Cinnamon Cove, a condominium complex about three miles from town.

However, it likely won't need the permit for that long, as it plans to eventually shut down the facility and reroute the sewer to its main treatment plant off Atlanta Highway.

If all goes as planned, the city hopes to move forward next year on a \$1.8 million project that involves building two pump stations, one at Cinnamon Cove and the other off Bell Drive, or near Gaines Ferry and McEver roads.

The project also entails installing a sewer line from Cinnamon Cove down Gaines Ferry Road to Atlanta Highway, crossing McEver Road.

It then would run north to the main sewer plant.

Construction could start in the spring, with the work taking about nine months, City Planner James Riker has said.

City Manager Bill Andrew has said the sewer expansion wasn't intended as a move to annex outlying areas, including Cinnamon Cove and Four Seasons neighborhoods, but rather to spur development in that part of town.

The two cities and Hall County have been talking about the future of South Hall sewer, an issue that has an often contentious past.

"We've had very fruitful discussions, working together like I haven't seen in five years," Andrew said. "It's very refreshing."

Rearden said, "This is a joint county-municipal district right now and we're trying to settle (service areas). We're almost there, I think."

Rearden said he believes South Hall, overall, is poised for growth.

He pointed to Friendship Road as an example. The Georgia Department of Transportation plans to award a contract in April to widen the road to four and six lanes between Interstate 985 and Ga. 211/Old Winder Highway.

"We think we will be ready to serve that (corridor)," Rearden said.