

11/15/07 Wilmington Experts at PenderWatch Speak on Sewer Alternatives

With Pender County preparing to implement its new wastewater master plan, PenderWatch & Conservancy brought in wastewater experts Bill Justice and Charles Adams to discuss sewer system alternatives at its board meeting last Wednesday evening.

Justice is Construction Superintendent of Public Utilities for the City of Wilmington, and Adams is Wastewater Collection System Manager.

“What are the alternatives?” asked Adams rhetorically. Septic systems for individual homes or small businesses, package plants for subdivisions, larger plants for larger jurisdictions, spray fields, chemical treatment, vacuum systems are just a few of the options open to communities and individuals. Adams has 25 years experience in public works as a public works director, operator, inspector, and field engineer.

“Wastewater treatment systems duplicate a swamp’s biological processes,” he explained. “They both use living organisms to digest the waste dissolved in water, leaving solid material that must be removed and cleaned water that can be returned to nature.”

“Most wastewater systems are private enterprises, not what you may think you are going to get with a public utility,” he emphasized. It’s a private enterprise carefully regulated by the Local Government Commission and funded by government loans and grants. Water and Sewer Districts are the basic self-governing unit for public utilities. Funds allocated to the District must be spent there and cannot be spread to larger jurisdictions.

There are two aspects of wastewater management, Adams said, collection and treatment. As of this year, Adams stated, the state mandates that certified operators must manage both.

PenderWatch President Don Ellson and other board members asked who was responsible for maintenance once a system went in.

Maintenance, Adams noted, is a key issue. “Taking care of things has never been a priority. It’s going to be a priority now.” Most builders who include a package plant in their subdivisions simply turn them over to the new homeowners associations, and there is little supervision of individual septic systems. Some jurisdictions, he noted, include tax-funded programs for regular septic system inspection and maintenance.

Adams explained the difficulty local governments have overseeing individual and small systems. The state now requires an engineer to prepare documents to show how to maintain any new system. Over time, older systems like individual septic systems will require professional oversight as well, he predicted.

Asked the difficult question whether individual septic systems, small package plants, or large government-run sewer systems is preferable, Adams replied, "This is my opinion. I'd want to have a more centralized treatment facility." Even with a modern system, he said, he would rather have a few large ones away from everything than several scattered small ones, although he admitted, "golf courses are great."

Regarding small, subdivision or shopping center package plants, he said a certified operator can be responsible for several package plants at one time. "I've heard of people doing ten, and you don't need to be there all day," he said.

PenderWatch is an all-volunteer environmental advocacy group centered on Pender County issues. The Board of Directors meets the second Tuesday of every month. Members and the interested public are invited to attend. For further information on PenderWatch or to become a member, call 270-3839, or sign up for the PenderWatch e-list by e-mailing vufinder@charter.net.

Call for volunteers: To help with the PenderWatch Adopt a Highway trash pickup, contact Cate Richie at 270-4751.