

A New Water Authority?

-Chris Smithson, Southern Pines native, resident, and Councilmember

Many remember the short-lived and ill-fated Moore Water and Sewer Authority (MOWASA) that, besieged by politics and distrust, was ultimately dissolved about ten years ago. Moore County took over its assets and operations. Today, ten years later, under similar conditions that led to MOWASA's original formation, it is looking more and more like a forming new separate water and sewer authority may be the best way to address our county's overall water and sewer needs.

Though it is considered a failure by most, MOWASA was not completely without merit. It did consolidate a number of entities under one roof. In addition to the county wastewater facilities, MOWASA ended up owning the systems in Pinehurst, Hyland Hills, Seven Lakes, and Vass. Notable systems not owned by MOWASA include Southern Pines, Aberdeen, and Robbins.

I don't know exactly why MOWASA failed other than that it became a dysfunctional organization. From what I have heard on the street as well as what I have read in old Pilot stories and editorials, the theories and reasons are many. Some, including the Pilot, blamed Southern Pines for not giving away its water treatment plant and thus its ability to control its own destiny in serving its customers. Other problems included purported voting blocs that caused many split votes. Other articles indicate that politicians at the county level sought to dismantle MOWASA very shortly after it was formed. For sure, MOWASA's failure had contributions from many different directions.

So, if MOWASA was such a disaster, why would it be worth looking at starting a new water and sewer authority? I think there are two reasons it is worth consideration.

First, to address county-wide issues, no one utility system, from the municipal systems to Moore County public utilities has the authority or mission to address many of them. A new water and sewer authority, which would be a state-recognized entity, CAN have the authority and means to address many future needs.

Second, if the authority's goals, mission, and public perception are based in reality, a workable system is possible even without obtaining ownership of every pipe, lift station, and water source in the county. The new authority does not necessarily have to own everything. There are a number of examples statewide, where this type of system is working today. That said, it may make a lot of sense for Moore County Public Utilities (MCPU) assets to be transferred over to the new authority.

In my opinion, almost everyone, including the County Commissioners, would be much happier if the Commissioners got out of the utility business. It would sure get Pinehurst off their backs. Seeing as how Pinehurst has been asking for quite some time that MCPU fix the lines downtown, Pinehurst would probably feel moderately more empowered if a new, less-political entity were in charge of their system's maintenance. When a utility customer such as Pinehurst asks their provider, "please fix our

pipes and please charge us for it," yet gets no results, one can see why they were willing to take the desperate step of buying the Wagram facilities and completely re-plumb the Village themselves.

I'm just in the throwing out an idea here, but forming a new water and sewer authority, just may be the thing to address county-wide water and sewer needs for many years to come. Let's see where this goes.