

# ENQUIRER JOURNAL

## County eyes plan to divvy up water supplies

**BY BILLY BALL**

Staff Writer

**MONROE**

September 26, 2008

County commissioners are considering a plan for divvying up Union's limited water that has sparked some debate on new versus old.

The policy, drawn up by county staff, distributes water resources among new and existing projects, much the same way Union divides its sewer access.

The plan gives top billing to projects that already have a water permit, and those that have top priority in sewer allocation.

But it has initiated questions on whether it assigns too much of the county's allowed 20 million gallons per day for new development rather than the existing tax base.

"We're in such a hole here and there's not going to be enough water to go around," said Commissioner Lanny Openshaw. "So who should I be more concerned with? The people that we have here now."

Board of Commissioners Chairman Allan Baucom said the plan could be missing a comprehensive discussion of water conservation and a public education component, but he praised its emphasis on industry.

"We have an opportunity now to take it and get a residential business tax base back into better alignment than what it currently is," Baucom said, pointing to county officials longstanding complaint that past growth tilted heavily toward homebuilding than recruiting commercial projects.

Commissioners are scheduled to hold a public hearing at their Oct. 6 meeting, starting at 7 p.m. in the Union County Government Center.

The policy can be viewed in its entirety on the county's Web site, [www.co.union.nc.us](http://www.co.union.nc.us).

It also reserves space for government and school facilities, as well as third-priority sewer projects.

The county gets 90 percent of its water, or about 18 million gallons per day, from the Catawba River treatment plant, with an additional 2 millions gallons flowing from neighboring Anson

County's plant.

But past county growth, especially in the west, has strained Union's ability to provide water for its customers, while many have turned to well water for their needs.

Water usage peaked beyond the county's capacity for 8 days in summer 2007, prompting concerns that Union is not sufficiently prepared for past or future demand.

Also, intense drought conditions for late 2007 and early 2008 forced the county to install water restrictions limiting irrigation to once a week.

Openshaw said the county has made an implicit agreement to serve its existing residents with water, not developers looking to build in the coming years.

"Union County over-committed," he said. "And it was the go-go days. Municipalities overcommitted, Union County over-committed.

"Nobody kept track. It's kind of like the broader issue, what's happening in the country with the housing market and the loans. ... There was a lack of planning, and it was all motivated by greed."

Baucom said his chief concerns will be including public education "regarding best management practices for watering lawns and plants to maintain them," adding some locals might not know which plants are most resistant to drought.

Baucom said he doesn't know when commissioners sign off on a policy, and Openshaw added that the Oct. 6 meeting will be a chance for the board to gather public input.

- *Billy Ball can be reached at 704-261-2226 or via e-mail at [bball@theej.com](mailto:bball@theej.com).*