

THE COUNTY EDGE

Water permits halted for 60 days

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MONROE - Because homebuilders are hoarding their water allocation for future Union County development, existing and ready-to-go customers are parched for water.

"This is the best no-growth policy this county has ever seen," said Commissioner Tracy Kuehler.

Arguments reignited among the Board of Commissioners Tuesday night (Jan. 20) about the county's current water supply. While commissioners Allan Baucom and Parker Mills argued that the county's water allocation policy should represent a compromise between existing customers and those builders that have already paid for capacity, Chairman Lanny Openshaw, Kim Rogers, and Kuehler countered that non-used water capacity leads to user restrictions.

"My definition of water availability is having water with no restrictions," Rogers said. "That is I can water my lawn when I want, wash my car when I want.

"We're making commitments for something we don't have," she continued. "We're misleading the public. You're restricting your existing customers."

The board retreated to closed session before emerging with a 3-2 split vote that calls for a 60-day halt to all new water permits, pending staff review aimed at freeing up capacity for shovel-ready projects.

The move pales in comparison to Openshaw's preference for a water permit stoppage with exemptions that favors shovel-ready projects currently waiting for water capacity. Openshaw said he knows of commercial projects that have been sidelined because of the county's current policy that allows builders to hoard water capacity.

"I say we cut it off," said Openshaw, adding that the county form a task force and "put more minds behind this project."

County Manager Al Greene pleaded with Openshaw to allow the staff more time to determine water commitments. He called a stoppage a "drastic decision."

"A hasty decision could lead to unforeseen consequences," Greene said. "I think we all have the same goal," Greene said. "Information takes time to develop. There is a lot of data to go through with these projects."

Openshaw took exception to Greene's characterization of "hasty," adding that the county has been evaluating the water allocation policy for months with his concerns previously noted. He said his objections had been falling on "deaf ears." Prior to Rogers and Kuehler joining the board, Openshaw had been in the minority on the issue.

Mills argued that the policy is intended to allow the county to honor its commitments.

Openshaw said any commitments should be on a first come - first serve basis and that developers should not be allowed to bank capacity for later build outs. To do so cheats existing customers and the taxpayers, since hoarding capacity yields no user revenue - proceeds that would go toward infrastructure expansion. Ironically, the policy hurts those who want build now, Openshaw said.

"That's not good for the taxpayer. It's not good for the development community," Openshaw added on Wednesday (Jan. 21).

Laid-off builder Rick Atwell said builders like him have been following the rules previously dictated by the county, which includes paying for permits in advance. For the county to change the policy during the current economic downturn hurts those abiding by the rules, Atwell said.

The commission majority countered that leaving the policy intact only further harms the downtrodden builder.

"The longer we have this plan in place, the harder it's going to be to take it off the table," Kuehler said.

Greene reiterated that the county currently has plenty of water and time to make adjustments without changing the policy.

"We have eight to nine million of gallons of water a day and we're issuing 25 permits a month, I think we have time," Greene said.

Mills and Baucom sided with Greene's recommendation and opposed the two-month permit halt. Mills added that conservation, regardless of water capacity, should be considered a part of being environmentally responsible.

"I think having open-ended irrigation is a thing of the past," Mills said. "It's not being good stewards of the environment."