

A Sad Day For Orange County

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For the Chapel Hill Herald/Herald Sun

December 12, 2008

Thursday, December 11, marks a dark moment in Orange County's history. At the County Commissioners' meeting that night, all the attending Commissioners, except one, voted to pursue the placement of a Waste Transfer Station in the heart of Orange County's farming district and alongside the Cane Creek Reservoir.

The County Commissioners, long vocal advocates of protecting the interests of people and ecosystems against the more powerful financial forces of industry and commerce, failed to attend to their own convictions. Barry Jacobs, Mike Nelson, Alice Gordon, Bernadette Pelissier and Steve Yuhasz voted to pursue the purchase of a 143-acre tract of land, currently known as the Howell Property, or the nearby plot, known as Site 759, in order to develop an industrial transfer station for the accumulation, packaging and transit of the County's 170 tons of daily trash.

The transfer station, which will bring with it four dozen garbage trucks, a dozen semi-trucks and countless other vehicles per day will unalterably turn Orange County's most rural and sparsely-populated farming area into a heavily-industrialized thoroughfare.

The meeting room, which was packed with citizens from the affected Bingham Township, was standing-room only. The citizens attending the meeting were visibly exasperated and distressed. A farmer mentioned that he wouldn't be able to access an area of his property, which requires him to drive his tractor on the road, if traffic filled the streets. A neighbor worried that his well would go dry if the site, which is not near a municipal water supply, drew from the subterranean aquifer. Bikers mentioned they feared for their lives to ride alongside semi-trucks on two lane roads. One man worried about the health effects of living near the cities' cumulative trash. Citizens implored the Commissioners to consider the County's carbon footprint resulting from shipping trash from the cities to a remote part of the county so that semi-trucks could take the trash back to the highways for delivery out of state.

The audience seemed shocked at the night's many contradictions: The Commissioners argued for a half an hour about the "sticker shock" that Efland residents would experience if their water bills went up twice in one year, while ignoring the life-altering shock of Bingham Township's 6,000 residents, many of whom have lived in this quiet multi-generational farming community their whole lives, who will suddenly live beside the County's industrial waste site and on newly congested thoroughfares.

The Commissioners lamented a roof leak at Phillips Middle School, and impressed upon each other the importance of repairing the schools with their finite funds, while, at the same time, authorizing the pursuit of a 143-acre piece of land, even when they set out to purchase only a fraction of that much acreage. Worse still, that land, which is valued below \$750,000, comes with an asking price of \$3 million.

Barry Jacobs lamented a trend of cities encroaching upon rural areas, which he called urban imperialism, while all but mentioning that he and the other Commissioners kowtowed away from Waste Transfer sites along the interstate because Hillsborough threatened annexation.

And after a resident expressed his feelings that the Bingham Township always gets the short-end-of-the-stick, citing OWASA's biosolid sludge dumping, the contentious development of the Reservoir

and now a proposed regional airport, Jacobs encouraged the audience to see these events, at least the waste transfer station and airport, as isolated events.

Only Pam Hemminger, a new member of the Board, expressed dismay at her colleagues' thinking: Our rural roads weren't built for industrial traffic, she said. This will unalterably mar the character of the area. Isn't there some spot along one of our two interstates that we could put this Waste Transfer Station?

Meanwhile, Alice Gordon, Bernadette Pelissier and Steve Yuhasz repeated identical refrains, almost pleading with their audience: We don't want to start the process over again, please, and, bureaucratically, We had criteria.

At around 10 p.m., the sad story that would define the evening began to emerge: The Commissioners had hired a consultant, Olver, Inc., to provide them with a formula for the siting process. They had hoped that the formula would be so broad that it would be, by definition, fair.

But that formula had become the Commissioners' Frankenstein: It had become so multifaceted and big, so valueless and abstract, that it produced a result contrary to human logic. It concluded that the best place for an industrial Waste Transfer Station was the farthest site from the interstate, the farthest point from the trash-generating cities, surrounded on all sides by farms and on slopes leading into the County's drinking water. By succumbing to their consultant's abstract numerics, the Commissioners lost track of common sense.

Hypocritical zoning standards also channeled through the air. If a shipping company wanted to move to Orange County, and approached the Commissioners with the request, "I've got fifty big trucks and a dozen semi-trucks that travel in and out of my facility every day. The facility emits noise and works daily with 170 tons of waste, some of which may be hazardous. I also need fire protection and an industrial infrastructure. Where should I move?", then how likely would the Commissioners be to reply, "How about you locate in the heart of one of our rural areas, far from interstates, surrounded on all sides by 200 working farms and directly beside our drinking water supply?"

When the tables were turned, and the Commissioners became those industrial CEOs, they readily sacrificed their commitments to the environment, to their rural constituents and to the safety of Orange County's citizens.

Mike Nelson, in trying to move the meeting efficiently forward, prompted the citizens who had signed up to speak to be brief—asking them even to be briefer than their time allotments. Later, when he spoke, he issued such a steady stream of boilerplate niceties (We really appreciate the public's input) that his generalizations rang hollow, impatient and smug.

By the end of the evening, it was clear that the Commissioners had made up their minds before the meeting had started. To the residents and farmers of Bingham Township, who had packed into the meeting room, taken seats on the floor, crammed into the hallways, written letters, made imploring speeches, and who would now see their rural community turned into an industrialized zone, their farms littered with trash, their skies filled for the first time in natural history with the sounds of an interstate, the Commissioners wanted to let them know that they were Sorry. They had used formulas and criteria. There had been deadlines and now those deadlines had passed. All opinions had been documented for the record. They wanted to let the people of Bingham know that they were humans in a bigger complex process too, merely pawns in the momentum of their own making.