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EDITOR'S PICK

County to proceed with Rogers Road sewer project

Katie Jansen Updated Feb 6, 2016

HILLSBOROUGH — The Orange County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously Tuesday night to allow county staff to continue the long process of installing sewer lines in the historic Rogers Road neighborhood.

The county will proceed — along with the help of Chapel Hill, Carrboro and OWASA — in obtaining easements necessary to install sewer lines that will bring sewer service to 86 parcels in the historically African-American neighborhood.

County staff estimates that easements will be needed for 80 properties. Seventy-three of these parcels are within the Rogers Road Historic Area designated by the Rogers Road Neighborhood Task Force and will have the opportunity to connect to the sewer line. But seven properties are outside the designated boundaries and won't be wrapped into the plan in which the government will waive installation and connection fees while also paying the cost of homeowners abandoning their septic tanks.

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Robert Campbell, president of the Rogers-Eubanks Neighborhood Association, said that at first, some property owners outside the boundaries were displeased and hesitant to allow OWASA to bury sewer lines on their properties.

But as public information meetings have been held and questions have been answered, Campbell told the board, “a lot of minds have been set at ease.”

Campbell said in an interview after the board’s vote that most residents had realized the easements were necessary to benefit everyone.

Even those wjp aren’t wrapped into this project will still have the opportunity to connect at a later time once the infrastructure is there, Campbell said. He added that even those who opt not to connect can benefit from increased property values.

Jesse Gibson of the NAACP said the project was much needed after decades of environmental health problems from a government-owned landfill and overflowing septic tanks.

“This is a win-win,” he said.

The county expects to have most of the easement negotiations completed by the end of March, said Travis Myren, deputy county manager.

The easement will give OWASA permission to lay pipe on land owned by individual property owners. The property owners will also have to agree not to plant anything that could interfere with sewer line maintenance.

Easement value is 20 percent of the land’s per square foot tax value for permanent easements and 10 percent of the tax value for temporary construction easements, according to county documents.

Myren estimated total acquisition costs to be \$212,000. The financial burden will be shared among the county, Chapel Hill and Carrboro, just as every other part of the project is financed.

Both Myren and Campbell acknowledged that there may still be a couple of property owners unwilling to negotiate. If negotiations are unsuccessful, the county can acquire the land through a condemnation process, which should be complete by the middle of May.



County attorney John Roberts explained the condemnation process to the board. The county would place a deposit of the easement's estimated value with the court. At that time, the county has control of the easement, and the only litigation that would take place would be regarding the value of the easement.

Board member Penny Rich expressed concern that this would slow down the project in a process that has already taken decades.

Roberts assured the board that the condemnation process would not hinder the process.

"We should know substantially ahead of time which property owners may be not willing to negotiate at a reasonable value, or what we think is a reasonable value," he said.

Campbell said he would continue to help communicate with the property owners to make the negotiations as smooth as possible. He said residents are asking questions and are engaged in the process.

"People are excited about the possibility of being able to connect to sewer pretty soon," he said.

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