

Blackmon Road eyes a cheaper green plan

Environmentally friendly options would provide sewer, water for low-income area
By Jamie Self - jself@heraldonline.com

Residents of the Blackmon Road community may have a "green" option for water and sewer services which could cost much less than previous plans. Composting toilets and man-made wetlands designed to filter and "treat" household water from washing dishes or laundry may provide an affordable alternative to traditional, underground water and sewer lines for the neighborhood, which has been without adequate water and sewer services for decades.

The York County neighborhood off Albright Road - bordered on three sides by Rock Hill city limits - has about 50 residents living in about 15 dwellings, according to the county's Planning Department. While about 80 percent of the residents have electricity, only 60 percent have working wells, and less than half have working septic tanks.

HOPPMAN, Mary



Several years ago, a grant paid to bring city water lines to A Place for Hope, a nonprofit founded in 2001 to provide basic services to residents and help them get water and sewer. Because of difficulty in blasting through the rocky soil, the project cost more than expected. Plans to extend traditional water and sewer lines to residents would cost in the millions and is likely be not feasible due to the region's topography and soil, planning officials have said.

Last year, A Place for Hope opened a washhouse with coin-operated laundry and showers for residents. Efforts to find more permanent solutions are ongoing.

A 'green' solution

With help from a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, A Place for Hope hired a Landscape Architect to explore alternatives to meet the neighborhood's utility needs.

Karen Sprayberry, community program coordinator for the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, and other DHEC staff have been meeting with residents to discuss their options as outlined in the architect's study.

Composting toilets and engineered wetlands emerged as the most practical solution at a community meeting earlier this month..

For drinking water, an above ground water line running through the neighborhood would cost far less than burying it, said Duane Christopher, the Rock Hill-based architect which did the study. Leaving it above ground would also reduce the costs of tapping into the line, he said. "Potable water is the easy part," Christopher said. "The hard part is taking care of the waste." A composting toilet is similar to a regular toilet, but does not flush or require water. Instead, waste collects in a reservoir and a heating element cooks the waste over time until it becomes like an ash ready for removal. Composting toilets have multiple chambers for waste which are rotated and cleaned out in six- or 12-month cycles, depending on the level of use. Air flow through the toilet reduces odor, according to manufacturers' websites.

Christopher proposes using engineered wetlands - areas of vegetation - to treat the household water. Household water would be piped to the wetlands area, where vegetation would remove nutrients from the water through natural processes. The estimated per dwelling cost is \$2,000 for the toilet and \$10,000 for the wetlands, though wetlands serving multiple residences could reduce the cost, Christopher said. Some homes may need to be modified to accommodate the toilet, he said. The technology has some benefits over traditional water and sewer systems, he said, which are designed around a "standard of using a lot of water." With the "green" solutions he's proposed, "we're saving water, we're saving connections, we're saving pumping, and it's sort of a cultural change," he said.

Help from municipalities

Either York County or the City of Rock Hill will have to apply for available grants to pay for the upgrades, Sprayberry said. Helping Blackmon Road is "simply the humane thing to do," said Mary Hoppmann, A Place for Hope's executive director. "People here are working to better themselves, which is the majority of people here." Many residents, such as Rev. James Hill who owns property and holds church on site, have invested a lot in the community, she said.

Blackmon Road became a point of contention for York County leaders after York County Councilman Bump Roddey asked council members to support A Place for Hope in the county's budget. The council refused, and Roddey accused them of singling out the organization and the neighborhood.

Councilman Eric Winstead, who opposed giving A Place for Hope operational support, said Thursday he would be willing to have the county help the neighborhood submit a grant. He said he would consider the county giving money as matching support for a grant tied to a specific project.

County Manager Jim Baker said the county has helped with similar projects before and would likely be open to doing so again. Jimmy Bagley, Rock Hill's assistant city manager, said city could coordinate with the county to assist the community.

Some residents are more hesitant than others to move forward with the plan. Britiany Gullatt, 19, said residents have felt "tricked" by outsiders coming into the community promising help. "People come into your home and say, 'We're going to do this,' but nothing happens," she said. Cleveland Kirk, who has lived in the community for 36 years, said he understands where that perspective comes from. "People came and told them so many lies they were scared," Kirk said.

Kirk lives with his wife, a retired seamstress. Both advocate the community take a role in improving its conditions. Even though they already have a working well and septic tank at their house, they want to see the plan through for the community, especially the children growing up there, Kirk said. Many of the residents really do want to see a change and will eventually come around, he predicted.