

Help for Blackmon Road

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Plans to take a green approach to improving living conditions in the Blackmon Road community appear promising. It's an imaginative alternative to conventional efforts that were going nowhere.

The failure to bring reliable water and sewer services to this low income area near downtown Rock Hill was not for lack of trying. Local governments and granting agencies have struggled for years to find a way to upgrade services for the neighborhood that is bordered on three sides by Rock Hill city limits but is under county jurisdiction.

Several years ago, a grant was approved to bring city water lines to A Place for Hope, a nonprofit founded in 2001 to provide basic services to the 50 residents living nearby and help them get water and sewer. But city workers encountered underground rock formations and rocky soil that made blasting through to install water and sewer lines prohibitively expensive.

Right now, residents have the option of using a washhouse and coin-operated laundry and showers at A Place for Hope. But the agency and officials in the city and county have been looking for more permanent solutions.

With help from a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, A Place for Hope hired landscape architect Duane Christopher to explore alternatives. Karen Sprayberry, community program coordinator for the S.C. 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.

Three proposals in that study stand out: Engineered wetlands could be used to filter household wastewater; water lines could be run above ground rather than below ground; and composting toilets could be installed instead of conventional flush toilets.

Plans to extend traditional water and sewer lines to residents would cost millions of dollars. The estimated per dwelling cost for the green plan would be \$2,000 for the toilet and \$10,000 for the wetlands, though wetlands serving multiple residents could reduce the cost, according to Christopher. And, he said, using an above-ground water line to supply drinking water would cost far less than burying it, especially with the ease of tapping into the line.

Three environmentally friendly options are nothing new. Composting toilets and engineered wetlands have been in use around the world for decades.

The toilets have multiple chambers for waste, which are rotated and cleaned out in six- or 12-month cycles, depending on frequency of use. Fans disperse heat resulting from decomposition and speed the drying process. The ash-like byproduct is odorless and easy to dispose of.

Vegetated wetlands filter household water from showers and dishwashing, and remove the nutrients from the water through natural processes. While 60 percent of Blackmon Road residents have working wells, fewer than half have working septic tanks, so wetlands would be a sensible, cheaper option.

Both Rock Hill and York County officials appear open to working together to help the plan move forward. That is necessary because the neighborhood is in something of a no-man's-land straddling the city and county.

Helping the residents of Blackmon Road, many of whom have lived in primitive dwellings for years, is a humane effort in which many throughout the community have been involved for years. After halting progress and many setbacks, this proposal looks like a possible breakthrough that is both economical and practical.

It also has the benefit of helping to conserve water and not harming the environment.

As one Blackmon Road resident noted, improving conditions in the neighborhood is especially important for the children living there. Congratulations to those who continue to work for this community and to those who came up with the enlightened approach to making the necessary improvements.