

Council split on sewer cost-share agreement
written by Newspark Team | March 18, 2014



Charlottesville City Council held its first public discussion on the details of a new sewer cost-sharing agreement Monday.

Three councilors said they would support the agreement with the Albemarle County Service Authority, while two were opposed. However, a final decision was deferred to council's April 7 meeting to allow more time for public review and input.

After a brief public hearing with comments from seven residents, councilors outlined their views and gave little indication that their positions would change during the next three weeks.

Councilor Dede Smith came out strongly against the agreement, calling the partnership with Albemarle County a "deal with the devil" based upon "fear mongering" by other members of the council.

"There is nothing fair about this agreement," Smith said. "Our moral obligation is not to the county, to make them feel better, to make them stop bickering with us ... Our moral obligation as city councilors is to city residents ... half of whom struggle to pay their utility bills."

Smith expressed concern about the rising costs of sewer services, which could go up as early as this summer if the agreement is approved.

"Nobody's disputing that we will pay more," Smith said. "Nobody really knows how much more that is at this point."

City staff has recommended approval of the cost-sharing agreement. City Manager Maurice Jones said the average single-family household would see their sewer bills go up 46 cents a month, or \$ a year.

"That's the cost of a Five Guys burger and fries for one of my sons," said Councilor Kathy Galvin, a

supporter of the agreement.

Galvin and Smith have represented the city throughout two years of negotiations. The catalyst to update the 1973 Four-Party Agreement, which created the current water and sewer management structure, was a fight over a \$33.3 million sewer pump station.

In late 2011, Albemarle officials balked at the city's insistence that the station be moved out of the Woolen Mills neighborhood for an additional \$13 million, as opposed to being upgraded in place.

Two Woolen Mills residents spoke at the public hearing and asked for the cost-share agreement to be approved.

"I live closer to the existing pump station than anyone else," said Chris Hays, who has a home adjacent to Riverview Park. "I'd like to speak in support of the agreement that was mediated. It does seem like, from everything that I understand, that it's a fair agreement."

As part of the new cost-sharing proposal, which required the help of a professional mediator, the Albemarle County Service Authority has said it will drop objections to the Rivanna Pump Station's price.

"I support this agreement because I think it's fair," said Peggy Van Yahres, who has lived in Woolen Mills for 35 years. "It seems like there was give and take, which usually means there was a fair agreement."

Other residents pleaded with the City Council to delay a vote because they said the public needs more time to review the proposal, which was announced in a news release March 11.

"I am not frustrated that you took a long time on this agreement," said city resident Rebecca Quinn. "I had hoped it meant you were fighting hard for a good deal for the city. No, I am frustrated that we only got a week [to review it]."

Smith was joined in her opposition to the agreement by new Councilor Bob Fenwick. He said he had "grave reservations" and was disappointed that his 45 years of construction and engineering experience were not utilized.

"I have attended three [closed] meetings for these negotiations and I have had no input," Fenwick said. "I have twice tried to defer this conversation until I have come up to speed, and it hasn't happened. I am very disappointed. I think I could add a lot to it."

Mayor Satyendra Huja and Councilor Kristin Szakos sided with Galvin in support of the agreement.

Galvin described the proposal as a fair outcome in a mediated settlement. The alternative, she said, would be an expensive legal battle in court. She it was critical that Albemarle had agreed to pay its "fair share" of the pipe tunnel needed for the Rivanna Pump Station.

"What's better? Moving forward or haggling endlessly over who pays for the \$11 million tunnel?" Galvin asked. "If we don't resolve this amicably, it will set us back decades in our relations with Albemarle County."

Galvin also said that the city was incentivized in the agreement to upgrade its sewer infrastructure and, as the county population grows and its infrastructure ages, over time Albemarle will take on a greater

share of the cost burden

"I am strongly in favor of this and I think it does assess the cost of growth in the county," Szakos said. "It does reward repair of infrastructure ... It makes everything more rational, more plannable and more fair."

Smith maintained that the city gets a much better deal with the status quo. At the end of the deliberations, she asked that a vote not be taken immediately so that residents, businesses and the University of Virginia could have more time to provide input.

The council agreed to place the cost-share agreement as an action item on its April 7 agenda.

"I don't want to have the same debate at the next meeting," Szakos said.