

## **Barton: Stop the shoveling**

[Tom Barton](#) | Wednesday, February 4, 2009 at 12:30 am

The thought of dumping treated wastewater into one of coastal Georgia's pristine saltwater estuaries is sickening.

But trying to slip it past the public without sufficient study?

That's enough to make you retch.

Hundreds of residents in nearby Bryan and Liberty counties are holding their noses and stomachs over a plan by the Liberty County Development Authority.

It wants to build a \$30 million plant that could dump up to 3 million gallons of treated sewage per day into a small, self-contained tidal tributary that's part of the Ogeechee River basin south of Savannah.

You can't blame people for being outraged.

Instead of pumping all this effluent into a river that has a constant flow to sea, or spraying it on a large field so it could be continually absorbed, imagine millions of gallons going into a holding pond.

Or a big outdoor toilet, if you will.

Except it doesn't get flushed after every use. Because of the tides, it gets flushed just twice a day.

No wonder 250 angry people showed up last Thursday for a public hearing in Midway to decry the proposal, which will introduce treated freshwater into a saltwater environment and dramatically change the delicate ecosystem.

Many of the plant's foes live in Bryan County. That's downstream from the discharge. It's wrong, however, to assume that the huge public outrage is just another case of NIMBY, or Not In My Backyard.

It's also a question of WITHITS - Where In The Heck Is The State?

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division, which has yet to issue a permit to build the plant, apparently believes all this freshwater wouldn't harm sea life.

But the EPD didn't do its own independent study. Instead, it seems to be taking the word of an engineer who is employed by the private company that would profit by overseeing the facility's construction.

Hey Mr. Fox. Here's the henhouse. Guard it.

Dr. Clark Alexander Jr. is a veteran scientist and researcher at the state's Skidaway Institute of Oceanography. He told me Tuesday that pumping a large amount of freshwater into a salt marsh estuary will have repercussions, including the loss of spartina grasses.

"That's the worst kind of place," he said. "It's the dead end of the tidal system. It's going to increase the range of stress that organisms will have to withstand."

Of course, there's another kind of pressure here, too - the political pressure to create jobs and accommodate growth.

But there's a right way and a wrong way to address these realities.

The EPD must stop and smell the outrage. Its credibility is almost shot. To regain it, the EPD must conduct a thorough, objective review of the plant's impact. Engage experts at the Skidaway Institute. Fully explore other options besides flushing everything into the marsh.

What's needed is more studying of all this treated excrement. And less shoveling.

Tom Barton is the editorial page editor of the Savannah Morning News.