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EPD to look closer at LCDA plant

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division has decided to allow an independent study of the Liberty County Development Authority's proposed wastewater treatment plan.

"It had a lot to do with the public comment we received," said Jeff Larson, Assistant Branch Chief in the EPD's Watershed Protection Branch. "Many of the comments we received from the Liberty and Bryan community were very specific to local concerns, and we don't want to do anything inappropriate to the Laurel View River."

The LCDA previously turned in a study with their permit request, saying the plant will not affect the environment, but it was conducted by CH2MHill -- the same company that is contracted to construct the plant.

This raised questions from the community and the Bryan County Board of Commissioners regarding the validity of the existing study.

Concerns included the potential destruction of the ecosystem from the discharge which would flow along the marshlands of Liberty and Bryan County.

"I think it's a great indication that the EPD does listen to the public," said Bryan County Commission Chairman Jimmy Burnsed, who sent a letter to the EPD requesting an independent study. "The biggest question raised at the public hearing is what will be the effect of fresh water being dumped into a salt estuary because this hasn't been done before. It's better to be safe rather than run into some problems later."

Larson said the EPD will look to the public for input on the study plan. He has yet to determine if this will be in writing or another public forum.

He said the study will take place around June or July, and a final determination on whether or not to issue the permit will take place around November-December.

"We generally know what a study plan consists of, but we want local input to help us decide things such as where to put monitoring stations," Larson said.

This is a victory for the Coastal Estuary Protection Association.

Advocacy of an independent study was one of the main reasons the group was formed.

"It's obvious to me that the EPD has the protection of our coast in mind, particularly in regard to this discharge permit," CEPA President Allen Davis said. "We fully support the EPD's decision to proceed with a study of the Laurel View river estuary, and we look forward to participating in this process."

Shortly before the decision, the EPD requested a meeting with CEPA, Davis said. It occurred Tuesday, March 3, which he believes is recognition of the volume of research his group has done. Davis said CEPA's stance against the wastewater plant "came from meetings with the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography, Ogeechee-Canoochee Riverkeepers and other scientists, hydrologists and biologists -- who are all very familiar with the dynamic environment we have here in our coastal rivers, estuaries and sounds."

Carmen Cole, Director of Administration and Finance for the LCDA, said she is disappointed in the delay of the project understands why the additional study will take place, based on the outcry from many residents.

"We felt like the science was enough previously (to determine the plant would not affect the environment), but if they (EPD) feel it warrants an additional study, we're comfortable with that."

Cole said the EPD had previously concurred with the LCDA's findings and sees this as a way to solidify the previous study.

"The reason we chose this project was to protect the environment," Cole said. "Hopefully, in the end, this will be something we can all agree on."