

State agency to re-examine Liberty wastewater plan

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RICHMOND HILL - The Georgia Environmental Protection Division has decided to re-study its conclusion that a saltwater river between Liberty and Bryan counties can accommodate 3 million gallons of treated wastewater daily.

"We are going to do a study of conditions in the river. And we're going to use the data from that study to verify that the modeling we did for the permit was correct, or is not correct," said Jane Hendricks, who manages the division's wastewater permitting program.

A crowd at a historical society meeting Thursday night in Richmond Hill applauded upon hearing of the decision.

Much of the opposition to the proposed wastewater treatment plant in Liberty County has come from residents in neighboring Bryan County.

The state division's decision follows an overflow public meeting in Midway in January. Few at that meeting spoke in favor of a \$30 million wastewater treatment plant being proposed by the Liberty County Development Authority.

The development authority is asking the state for permission to build the plant in its Tradeport East industrial park. The plant would be permitted initially for 2 million gallons daily and would expand to 3 million gallons in a second phase.

Development authority officials have said the freshwater effluent would not harm the saltwater river, and have pointed out that some of the treated wastewater would be re-used for irrigation.

But the plant's effluent will drain from the Laurel View River into the Ogeechee River basin and adjacent downstream Bryan County, where residents have been dogged in their opposition. The permit was well on its way to completion when opponents provoked the public hearing in January.

"This permit application, which calls for effluent to be discharged into ... a saltwater estuary, is unprecedented in the state of Georgia," said Allen Davis, president of the Coastal Estuary Protection Association.

The Environmental Protection Division does not "have the model, the hydrology, the real experience and basis to evaluate this type of permit," he contended.

"Even as saltwater basins go, the Laurel View River is unique among estuaries. It doesn't have consistent freshwater flowing through it," Davis said.

What exactly will be studied, and how the study will be conducted, are yet to be decided. The study will be conducted in June and July, when heat and lack of rain stress the saltwater basin. Public input will be involved, and another public hearing could be possible. A report is expected sometime in the fall.

"This is what we believed should occur," Davis said, referring to the proposed permit getting a second look. "Now we have a chance to evaluate this in a much more thorough way, for the benefit of all of us on the coast."