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White Cross residents, left, on a tour of UNC's Bingham Animal Research Facility on Thursday are shown diagrams and photos of a new million gallon runoff basin by Vice Chancellor Bob Lowman and Mary Beth Koza, right, UNC's director of Environment, Health and Safety.

UNC upgrades site's waste system

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Official repeats no plan to expand Bingham Facility

BY BETH VELLIQUETTE
Correspondent

CHAPEL HILL Cliff Leath says he is starting to believe UNC is doing the right thing as it builds a new wastewater treatment system at the animal research center next to his home.

"I think they've done a lot of good things here," he said. "But they were kind of forced to do them when everything happened."

It still irks him that UNC decided to build such a large facility in the rural area 12 miles west of the main campus in Chapel Hill and then rushed to put in a wastewater system that failed and spilled treated wastewater into a tributary of Collins Creek, which runs between his property and the facility.

"What's been disappointing to me is UNC has been reactive, and they were not transparent from the very beginning," Leath said.

It would have been much more sensible to put the facility at the College of Veterinary Medicine at

N.C. State University because it has the infrastructure for dealing with animal waste and is connected to the city sewer system, Leath said.

On Wednesday, Leath and UNC Associate Vice Chancellor for Research Bob Lowman, who is in charge of the construction at the facility, spoke before the N.C. Environmental Review Commission, and on Thursday afternoon, Lowman led a restricted tour of the Bingham Research Facility on Orange Chapel Clover Garden Road.

Lowman and Mary Beth Koza, director of environmental health

and safety at UNC, answered questions from three Orange County commissioners and about 10 neighbors during the tour.

The new clay-lined holding basin, which will hold 1.1 million gallons of treated wastewater and is scheduled to be finished by May, was off limits on the tour because of the large equipment and mud there, Lowman said.

The Bingham Research Facility is home to about 200 dogs, which have genetic blood diseases including hemophilia. They are used for research for those diseases,

SEE BINGHAM, PAGE 5A

BINGHAM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

and UNC officials say some of its research has resulted in successful treatment for some people with hemophilia, saving them hundreds of thousands of dollars in the cost of their medicines.

The dogs live inside three buildings, and under the previous system, their waste was washed out of their cages each day, creating a large amount of wastewater for the facility. Now the facility uses pine shavings in the dogs' pens and cleans that out, bags it and hauls it to the landfill. It washes out the cages less frequently, meaning there is less wastewater to treat.

That water will be treated and held in the holding basin before it is pumped through a drip irrigation system in four fields totaling 5.8 acres on the property, according to Lowman and Koza.

Some of the neighbors on the tour asked questions.

■ Will the facility be expanded to hold more dogs?

"There is no plan for any more buildings here," Koza said.

Lowman said UNC does plan to expand its research program using horses, but the horses will be kept at N.C. State.

■ Why did UNC buy more property around the facility if it doesn't plan to expand?

The waste water basin is close to the property line, Lowman said. "When we had the chance to buy that property, we did, as a buffer," he said.

Lowman conceded during the tour, as he has before, that UNC made mistakes when it put in its first wastewater system, \$3 million worth of mistakes.

Until the new system is completed and functional, the wastewater is being stored in the old treatment system tanks, and tanker trucks haul it to Chapel Hill to be treated there.

Construction crews are working day and night to finish the new system by May, and once it's complete, the old system will be dismantled and removed, Lowman said.

The Bingham Facility: The story so far

UNC has housed research animals at the Bingham Facility, once commonly called "The Farm," on Orange Chapel Clover Garden Road west of Carrboro since the 1970s.

The facility made headlines in May 2010 when the university paid a \$15,000 state fine for leaking an unknown amount of treated wastewater into Collins Creek. UNC officials first suspected that a partially filled 1.6 million gallon storage pond was leaking the previous October, according to university correspondence. They did not notify the state until December as they continued to investigate the problem.

The spill surfaced as UNC planned to add three buildings and expand from 85 dogs to up to 450 dogs and 150 hogs. After repeated treated-wastewater leaks, it shelved the plan and returned a \$14.5 million federal grant when it determined it would need another \$20 million to make the expansion work.

The facility in rural southwest Orange County houses dogs used in hemophilia research. A building was intended to house dogs for a muscular dystrophy researcher, but he left the university after UNC returned the federal grant.

STAFF WRITER MARK SCHULTZ