

**Orange County
Commission for the Environment**

Meeting Summary

February 10, 2014

Orange County Solid Waste Management Administration Building, Chapel Hill

PRESENT: Jan Sassaman (Chair), May Becker, Loren Hintz, Donna Lee Jones, David Neal, Steve Niezgodna, Jeanette O'Connor, Rebecca Ray, Gary Saunders, Lydia Wegman, David Welch

ABSENT: Peter Cada

STAFF: Rich Shaw, Tom Davis GUESTS: Gayle Wilson, Eric Gerringer, Tom O'Dwyer

- I. **Call to Order** – Sassaman called the meeting to order at 7:30 pm.
- II. **Additions or Changes to Agenda** – There were no changes or additions.
- III. **Approval of Minutes** – Sassaman asked for comments on draft minutes for January 13. Neal motioned to approve as written; O'Connor seconded. Approved unanimously.
- IV. **Industrial Hemp Film** – Tom O'Dwyer (former CFE member) presented information about the benefits of growing industrial hemp as an agricultural crop. He began by quoting from a Forbes on-line magazine article from 2013. He noted that since growing hemp was outlawed in 1971 seventeen states have passed some kind of law in support of growing or experimenting with hemp. O'Dwyer said the Farm Bureau has changed its position such that it also now supports hemp production. He also noted that hemp can be a more profitable crop than corn, and provided some figures from Canada.

Neal said O'Dwyer's information is persuasive, and noted that Congress recently passed a Farm Bill that allows the study of hemp production in the United States.

Welch cautioned that increased hemp production could spur farmers to grow hemp in previously uncultivated areas of ecological significance, which is what happened when corn prices rose to high levels in Midwestern states.

Sassaman asked O'Dwyer what he wanted from the CFE. O'Dwyer said he would like the CFE to indicate its support of industrial hemp production in North Carolina in light of the environmental benefits of growing hemp. He would like the CFE to co-sponsor a showing of the film, "Bringing It Home" along with other county advisory boards, such as the Agricultural Preservation Board and the Economic Development Commission.

Hintz said it may be worthwhile for the CFE to co-sponsor a film event, but he would like to see more definitive information, including the findings of published studies, about the environmental benefits of growing hemp on farmland. Neal agreed, because if the CFE co-sponsors the film it would appear that the CFE was supportive of growing hemp.

O'Dwyer said he had provided some documentation earlier, but would re-send to CFE members. Jones referred members to the Congressional Research Service publication O'Dwyer had provided. Sassaman thanked O'Dwyer for his presentation.

V. **Orange County Recycling Program update** – Sassaman introduced Gayle Wilson (Solid Waste Management Director) who he had invited to provide an update on the latest proposal for funding and enhancing the County's recycling program.

Wilson began with an overview of the recycling program, including the following:

- Orange County closed its landfill in July 2013; the County is getting ready to cap the landfill, and expects it be completed by July/Aug. 2014 (costing \$3.5 million)
- Orange County opened its upgraded Walnut Grove Road solid waste convenience center in 2013; permitting for upgrading the Eubanks Road SWCC by the Town of Chapel Hill is expected to allow completion by Sept. 2015
- The scales and household hazardous waste collection will be relocated to the north side of Eubanks Road, so all public facilities will be co-located there
- Orange County will continue to provide curbside recycling service within the three municipalities (in town limits); this service will be supported by 3-R fees charged to town residents. The County has ordered 19,500 roll carts for recycling.
- Orange County is still considering whether to provide curbside recycling to a portion of the residents in the unincorporated area of the county

Wilson said the County is considering two options for funding curbside recycling for residents in suburban areas:

- 1) Establishing a Solid Waste Service District effective July 1, 2014, which would allow charging a tax to replace the annual \$38/household Rural 3-R Fee, which was assessed on property tax bills from 2004 to 2012.
- 2) Establishing a subscription-type service for those residents that would choose to have their recycling picked up from their homes rather than having to take it to a solid waste convenience center (or not dispose of their recycling properly)

Wilson said the County will hold public hearings on March 18 in Chapel Hill and April 1 in Hillsborough. He provided a map showing the proposed Solid Waste Service District.

Wilson said the service district option would provide a stable and predictable revenue source, but it would also apply to vacant properties where there is no residential dwelling. He said the subscription-type service would provide more flexibility to residents. Wegman asked if there needed to be a minimum number of residents subscribing to make the subscription-type service viable and cost effective. Wilson said yes, but did not have any figures available at this time. He said fees would have to increase if there weren't a sufficient number of participants. He cited a 5-10 percent level of participation with existing subscription-type programs, such as in Alamance County.

Hintz asked how the service district would apply to farmland where there is no residential dwelling. Wilson said the fee would be applied based on the tax value of the land. If the farmland were enrolled in the County's present use value taxation program then the fee would be based on that lower tax valuation.

Neal asked if the final decision would be made by voters or the BOCC. Wilson said the BOCC would decide on which approach to adopt.

Sassaman reminded CFE members of an April 2013 memorandum to the BOCC in which the CFE urged the BOCC to work with the towns to find a way to finance the County's recycling program in a way that would not threaten the continued success of the program. He then handed out a draft resolution for CFE consideration. He explained his interest in the CFE supporting the proposed service tax district proposal.

Welsh asked Wilson how much taxes would increase. Wilson estimated a 1½ cent increase for five years, and then a possible reduction after the rollout carts were paid off.

Wilson was asked whether the name “solid waste tax district” meant that funds could be used for other solid waste purposes. Wilson said it was only intended for recycling.

Hintz said he supported the resolution, but said the County would need to provide clear and sufficient public information to explain the purpose and scope of the tax district. He said he would like CFE members to have “talking points” to share as needed.

Hintz motioned to approve the resolution, seconded by O’Connor. CFE members pointed out some edits needed for paragraphs two, three, eight, and eleven. Hintz and O’Connor agreed to amend the motion to include those edits. Sassaman called for a vote. The CFE voted unanimously in favor of adopting the resolution and sending it to the BOCC for consideration.

Wilson then introduced Eric Gerringer, the County’s new recycling program manager.

- VI. **State of the Environment 2014** – Shaw reported on the status of the report, including a summary of the changes made with help from CFE members since the January meeting. He said there had been substantial improvements to all sections of the report.

Shaw referred CFE members to a staff memo (Attachment 6) listing several things that need to be revised or completed. He suggested each of the committees work on the items listed for their respective section of the report, and, most importantly, to identify “critical issues” and specific recommendations to highlight at the front of the report.

Members noted that someone would also need to check each link to the referenced web pages to make sure they are still active. Also, to consider making a pdf copy of each link content so that the information would remain available in the future.

Sassaman asked for volunteers from each committee to take a lead role in completing their respective section. Saunders agreed to work on the Air and Energy section. Hintz agreed to work on the Land Resources section. Davis said he would handle the Water Resources section. O’Connor agreed to help identify the critical issues and key recommendations for the front of the report. Finally, Ray offered to help design the symbols to represent the status and trends for each environmental indicator.

CFE members agreed to work toward completing the final edits by February 24 so that staff could prepare a final draft for CFE members to review prior to the March meeting.

- VII. **Environmental Summit** – Sassaman reported he asked Norman Christensen, research professor and founding dean of the Duke Nicholas School for the Environment, to be the keynote speaker at the planned Environmental Summit. O’Connor reported on her subcommittee’s efforts to identify a suitable location and date for the summit. She said the NC Botanical Garden and Maple View Agricultural Center would be available for certain dates in May 2014. She noted that Davis had identified other potential locations.

The CFE agreed to work toward holding the Environmental Summit on either May 17 or May 31, depending on the availability of Dr. Christensen and a suitable venue. Sassaman and O’Connor will report back to the subcommittee for further consideration.

- VIII. **Committee Meetings** – The committees did not meet.

- IX. **Updates and Information Items** – Information on the following subjects was included in the meeting materials and selected items were summarized by staff: a) the Renewable Energy and Efficiency Work Group, b) Orange County fair proposal, c) UNC Bingham facility update, d) a new solar power program in Durham, e) Orange County transit plan update, OWASA’s efforts to protect the local water supply, and f) the Lands Legacy action plan (2014-17).
- X. **Adjournment** – Sassaman adjourned the meeting at 9:30 pm.

Summary by Rich Shaw, DEAPR Staff