



County questions plans for growth

Analysis: Agreements don't meet necessities

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New developments proposed in annexation plans by the City of Beaufort leave needs for fire protection, libraries, schools and roads unmet, county officials said Wednesday.

The city announced last month that it is pursuing annexation plans for more than 5,000 acres in the rural Grays Hill and Seabrook communities, likely permitting more than 16,000 homes. The City Council is expected to consider final approval for the annexations at its Feb. 14 meeting.

In a memo to County Administrator Gary Kubic, Planning Director Tony Criscitiello said that the review of the initial plans presented to the county last week doesn't sufficiently meet required services, potentially leaving the cost to residents of unincorporated Beaufort County.

"We're not challenging the annexation," Kubic said Wednesday. "We're trying to assist in understanding the causes and effects."

Fire service: With the municipality not collecting impact fees for fire protection and library facilities, Criscitiello stated in the memo that costs for the buildings and equipment needed to provide services haven't been properly laid out.

Burton Fire District Chief Harry Rountree said the district's board was meeting with its lawyers Wednesday night to weigh the impact of the proposed annexation plans.

Libraries: The memo suggests a \$5.2 million library would be required to meet state standards with an additional \$4.15 million needed to fill it.

County leaders have been critical of the city's refusal to collect the library impact fee to pay for system improvements, but City Manager John McDonough said the city already has begun discussions about charging the fee to pay for expansion plans for the downtown branch.

Roads: U.S. 21, the primary artery into northern Beaufort County, would exceed its capacity with just 10 percent of the proposed development, the memo says. County planners and engineers are calling for a traffic impact analysis to determine ancillary routes that could pull traffic off of the

highway.

Schools: An additional 4,703 students estimated from the new developments would require four new elementary schools, two new middle schools and a new high school, requiring 184 acres, even though only 62 acres is offered in the development agreements.

The school district is planning an 800-student Seabrook high school, but there are no other plans for new facilities in northern Beaufort County.

McDonough said he had not seen the memo and could not comment on it, but that the development agreements are fluid and continue to evolve.

Ready to begin a year-long regional planning effort this month to lay out growth areas and impacts, county officials were caught off guard by the city's plans. Kubic said the county may have to change the scope of the planning effort with so much land now pulled off of the table.

"I'm not saying stop," said County Council Vice Chairman Skeet Von Harten. "I'm saying don't annex and expect others to pay the bill."

Misidentified earlier this week by petition organizers as assisting with a petition to the City Council to delay annexation, Von Harten said he is instead calling for talks between county and city officials to get a better understanding of development plans.

Von Harten's brother, C.H. Von Harten, is one of the coordinators of the petition.

Kubic said Wednesday the memo will be available today on the county's Web site, bcgov.net.

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