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## **UNCW, county spar over cut contract**

### **New Hanover terminates water-testing agreement with school**

The relationship between New Hanover County and the University of North Carolina Wilmington, like some of the county's waterways, is looking a bit polluted these days. The county has ended a 13-year relationship with UNCW for water monitoring of the county's tidal creeks, replacing the school with a private vendor.

County Manager Bruce Shell said the move was made to improve the timely release of data so that, if there was a problem, the county could quickly respond to any public health concerns.

As is relatively normal with scientific reports, school researchers and students would compile and analyze a year's worth of samples before producing a report and giving it to the county in the spring - generally about 18 months after the first samples were taken. But that lag time, especially when worrisome readings were found, concerned county officials.

"We want to have the ability to be part of the solution, and we feel with this move we've positioned ourselves to be more proactive in our approach," Shell said.

But the UNCW researchers losing the county funding think there are more troubling motives for the switch.

"It is clear that they are very angry that Mike and I made public comments about water-quality issues and their anger was the reason they canceled the contract with UNCW," said Larry Cahoon, who with Mike Mallin is the lead researcher with the water-monitoring project. "What they've done is shoot the messenger."

Shell bristles at the accusations that the researchers are being "punished" for raising red flags about problems in the county's public trust waters.

But Cahoon said the timeline of events makes the conclusion inevitable.

"How can a community make wise decisions if necessary information is being squelched and suppressed?" he said. "That's bad government in action."

Mallin called the county's action "totally unwarranted."

Even UNCW Chancellor Rosemary DePaolo said she's concerned about the impact of the county's decision.

"It's unfortunate that it has come to this," she said. "But I will continue to defend my faculty's right to speak out, as scholars and as private citizens, on the research they did and shared with the county."

Up until recent weeks, the monitoring program appeared to be a successful collaboration between New Hanover and UNCW.

Started in 1993, the program monitors five tidal creeks - Bradley, Futch, Hewletts, Howe and Pages creeks. Funding from the city of Wilmington has helped expand the program to include other waterways in the county, and the research that's flowed out of the project was instrumental in getting North Carolina to adopt more stringent stormwater rules to protect coastal water quality.

In July, the *Star-News* published a story highlighting water-quality concerns around boat ramps and some nonbeachfront swimming areas, focusing on dangerously high bacteria readings recorded at the small public beach at the county's Castle Hayne Riverside Park.

The story was based on information gathered by one of Cahoon's graduate students for her thesis.

The 13-page research paper was included in the 102-page watersheds report, which covered water monitoring between August 2005 and September 2006, that was given to New Hanover County in March.

No mention of the boat ramp study - or any red flags it might have raised - were included in the report's executive summary, which focused on brief water-quality overviews of each of the county's watersheds.

How that information should have been shared appears to be the fuse that ignited any underlying concerns county officials had with the school-run program.

Blindsided by the *Star-News* story, some county officials complained to DePaolo that they hadn't been made aware of the potential health threat by UNCW prior to reading about it. This wasn't the first time the school's researchers had frustrated the county. Cahoon and others have often spoken out during the region's recent sewer woes, many times knocking local officials for letting growth outpace development while letting existing infrastructure crumble.

But Shell said New Hanover County respects the role scientists play in helping to keep the public informed and shaping the debate and response on issues - even if the criticism is at times aimed at the county.

His concern, which he said he had prior to the July article, was in the timely availability of data gathered by UNCW under the county's contract - although Mallin said no one had previously mentioned the issue to him.

"If we're paying someone to do a service, we want to know if those counts look good," Shell said. "We want to know what the issues are so we can effect some change."

The county's new contract is with Coastal Planning & Engineering. Shell said not only is the new contract cheaper - \$54,000 versus \$60,000 - but it also covers more testing and a quicker turnaround.

The county intends to post the sampling results on a Web page where anyone, including UNCW, can access the information.

But Cahoon scoffed at the notion that UNCW wasn't forthcoming with its data or was primarily interested in using the information to pursue academic purposes, like publishing scientific papers.

"They pay for this report and they didn't read what we wrote," he said. "That's not our fault."

### **Local, state reaction**

The decision to end the contract with UNCW hasn't just created waves on campus.

While frustrated with the way the information about the Castle Hayne water-quality woes came out, Commissioner Nancy Pritchett said she doesn't think terminating the contract with the school was the right step.

"I think the whole thing is the result of some unfortunate circumstances and maybe could have been sorted out by getting everyone together to look at ways of improving communication," she said.

But Commissioner Bill Kopp said he supported the move and was looking forward to see what the new contractor could offer the county.

"This was a decision made by Bruce Shell, and I stand behind him," Kopp said.

Commissioner Bobby Greer, who also supported the decision, said he has had concerns about the program's fairness, considering some of the previous public comments by Cahoon that he called "prejudiced and biased."

Commissioners Bill Caster and Ted Davis Jr., couldn't be reached for comment Friday.

As increasingly incendiary e-mail continues to fly over the county's decision, some officials

are trying some sort of detente even as they try to figure out exactly what's going on. State Rep. Danny McComas, R-New Hanover, said he wanted to get all of the facts from both sides before making a judgment.

"But with the situation with all of the sewer spills we've had, this is not the best timing," he added quickly.

State Rep. Carolyn Justice, R-Pender, said she was surprised and more than a little concerned about New Hanover's move - especially since she is the former chairwoman of the Lower Cape Fear River Program.

"I certainly hope we're not past the point that we can't come to a solution that's good for the citizens and all parties involved," she said.

Shell said he didn't rule out UNCW rejoining the program in the future if the researchers could provide what the county is looking for. He also reiterated the county's commitment to continued monitoring of its tidal creeks.

Cahoon said that the county's action, while regrettable, wouldn't muzzle him or others at UNCW in raising concerns when they're warranted.

"I've got tenure, I'm a full professor and this is what I'm supposed to do," he said.

#### ON THE WEB

Go to [www.StarNewsOnline.com](http://www.StarNewsOnline.com) and click on this story to read UNCW researcher Larry Cahoon's e-mail about New Hanover County's decision to end its contract with the Tidal Creeks Program and County Manager Bruce Shell's response to Cahoon's comments.

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