



Western Carolina OP ED
Community Leaders Plan for the Next 20 Years of Wastewater Infrastructure
By George W. Fletcher
Upstate Roundtable Chairman

In 1994, Jane Mattson chaired a remarkable planning process called the Upstate Roundtable. At that time, Mrs. Mattson was a member of the Western Carolina Regional Sewer Authority's Board of Commissioners and was acutely aware that the region's wastewater treatment facilities were not keeping up with the area's growth and rapidly changing water quality standards.

More than 100 community volunteers from Greenville and four surrounding counties labored for 18 months on the Upstate Roundtable. They collected the best population projections available in order to size future treatment plants. Their plan called for \$350 million to consolidate and upgrade facilities. In addition, the group provided 41 other recommendations regarding state and regional policies, plant operations and plan implementation. The final plan was endorsed by 33 different political, business and non-profit entities in the region.

The Upstate Roundtable has guided Western Carolina's activities for the past 14 years. Approximately 90% of the plan has been implemented, and capacity in the system has been restored. Effluent from all of Western Carolina's plants meet water quality standards at the point of discharge, and the organization has won numerous national awards for innovative operations.

In conjunction with Greenville County's current land use planning process, the Western Carolina Board decided to re-establish the Upstate Roundtable. In 2008 there are a new range of issues, including future effluent standards, evolving technologies, water reuse, micro-contaminants such as hormones in the effluent, septic tank usage, storm water contamination, and inflow and infiltration in aging sewer systems.

Western Carolina's previous Board Chair, John Boyette, asked me to chair the Upstate Roundtable. The Committees and their Co-Chairs are:

Policy and Community Issues: JD Martin (Board) and Brad Wyche (Community)
Technical: John Boyette (Board) and Jim Gossett (Community)
Regulatory and Legislative: Butch Merritt (Board) and Dwight Loftis (Community)
Finance: Gary Gilliam (Board) and Kathy McKinney (Community)

Communications: Barbara Wilson (Staff) and Debbie Nelson (Community)

Other subcommittees will be established as necessary. John Owings of the Greenville County Planning Commission will chair a subcommittee to select a “most likely” growth scenario. At a recent meeting, growth models developed by the Strom Thurmond Institute, the Greenville Water System and each of the five counties in Western Carolina’s service area were presented to the Upstate Roundtable committee members. Future treatment needs must be based on when and where growth will occur. Hopefully, this model will also be used by the School District and other utility planners in the region.

With the drought conditions over the past 10 years, we need to consider opportunities for reclaimed water reuse through a “purple pipe” system. Such systems are widely used for non-potable water applications such as cooling as well as lawn, golf course and park irrigation.

Our region is facing an expenditure of at least \$100 million to reduce storm water and ground water discharges that flow into our sewer system through cracked sewer lines. As part of the planning process, we will consider innovative ways to finance these expenditures and to better manage our sewer and treatment plant infrastructure.

Finally, energy is a major expense. We need to identify new methods to make our treatment plants greener and to better utilize biomass for both energy production and agricultural application.

Once we have assembled the major plan elements, we will look at financing strategies and when the money will be required. We look forward to presenting our findings and recommendations to elected officials and the public.

I sincerely appreciate the efforts of the Co-Chairs and the more than 100 volunteers currently working on the Upstate Roundtable. We anticipate completing the project by the end of this calendar year to coincide with the timing of the mandated Greenville County land use planning process. It is our hope that the current planning process will provide Western Carolina and other Upstate utilities with the same sound guidance that Mrs. Mattson’s plan provided in 1994.

You can find more information about this effort at www.UpstateRoundtable.org. If you have questions or an interest in participating, please contact the appropriate Western Carolina staff person through the web site.