

## **Animal shelter, OBX sewer services Currituck priority**

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COROLLA – A new animal shelter in Maple and a wastewater treatment plant in Ocean Sands will top the list of new capital projects in Currituck for the coming year, commissioners decided at the board's annual retreat Saturday.

Commissioners compiled a long list of county needs during a brainstorming session, but an informal vote narrowed those priorities to six. The list will assist County Manager Dan Scanlon in preparing a budget for the upcoming year, said the session's facilitator, Lydian Altman with the University of North Carolina's School of Government.

Other priorities included:

- Deciding the level of service to be provided by fire and emergency medical services;
- Developing a plan to boost off-season tourism;
- Deciding if the county is capable of developing two small area plans at the same time, one for Moyock and one for Currituck's off-road beaches; and
- Deciding the next step for economic development – possibly by getting input from businesses in roundtable discussions.

In coming months, commissioners are expected to schedule work sessions to discuss the issues in more depth.

Altman said the challenge ahead for commissioners will be sticking to those goals throughout the year as other competing needs arise.

Scanlon warned the Currituck Board of Commissioners will have less money to spend than in previous years.

A flat tax base means the county can no longer afford to fund multiple projects at the same time, he said.

"We are going to have to make some tougher decisions than we have had to make before. We are going to have to say no to some stuff," said Scanlon.

Timing for some of the projects is also a concern. If the county doesn't make some big decisions about commercial development in the four-wheel drive areas of Currituck beaches, then the courts may, Commissioner Paul Martin warned. Already the county is facing one lawsuit by a developer wanting to build commercial buildings in the off-road community.

In addition, three or four applications for “conference centers” — large beach structures with 24 or more bedrooms — have recently been submitted, said County Attorney Ike McRee.

“We are going to have to make some decisions, and I think we are going to have to make them sooner rather than later,” said Chairman Paul O’Neal.

The pending lawsuit adds urgency to the issue, but the county’s planning staff is already tied up with forming a small area plan for Moyock, said Scanlon. Jumping on another project would be too taxing to the county’s planning staff, he said.

Commissioners agreed to take a closer look in coming months at if and how they can handle the ongoing Moyock Small Area Plan and take on another complex planning project for the northern Outer Banks. In the past, commissioners have rejected a proposal to contract out the work to consultants.

Commissioners said they also want to take a closer look at travel expert Judy Randall’s report last year on how to improve tourism on the Outer Banks. The county needs to focus on expanding the number of visitors during the “shoulder season,” the months before and after the busy summer months, commissioners said.

The fate of a proposed Mid-Currituck Bridge will have a big impact on that effort, commissioners agreed.

“Everything centers on the bridge as far as economic development,” said Commissioner Butch Petrey.

The new priorities did not exclude several ongoing projects to which the county has already committed. Plans for Currituck Community Park, including practice soccer fields, still remain on go. Renovations to the ABC store in Moyock also fall under prior budget priorities.

Other concerns and capital projects may have to wait, however.

Commissioners bumped several projects to lower priority, meaning they are less likely to get funded in the coming year.

Lower priority projects include:

- More hangar space and a new taxiway for the Currituck Regional Airport;
- A salary study for employees, particularly for the tourism department. The Randall report suggested the county examine salaries to ensure they are competitive with what other counties are paying. Scanlon said the county underwent a study just two years ago, and some employees’ salaries were adjusted as a result.
- A new interpretive exhibit and building for historic boats and agricultural equipment at the Rural Center in Powells Point.
- Construction of a new school, possibly a new elementary school in Moyock.
- Small-area plans for landing points for the proposed Mid-Currituck Bridge.

