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When Environmental Justice Hits the Local Agenda: A Profile of Spartanburg and Spartanburg County, South Carolina

Cory Fleming

When Jim Hartmann came to Spartanburg County, South Carolina, in 1999 to serve as the county administrator, he did not anticipate that the county would attract the kind of national attention it has in the past several years. Hartmann knew the local political leadership wanted to see changes in management and was receptive to new ways of doing business, but environmental justice was not a topic on the county's public agenda.

Less than a year later, part of the community was in turmoil because of the discovery of serious environmental contamination on two sites in the predominately African-American neighborhoods of Arkwright and Forest Park, located on the southern tip of the city of Spartanburg, the county seat.

The story of how this situation evolved into the community's being designated in 2000 as one of the first National Environmental Justice Demonstration Projects offers good lessons for other local governments faced with environmental justice issues. Changes in management and an increased emphasis on teamwork by the local governments prevented the situation from turning into an adversarial one.

The response from the county and city, as well as their subsequent involvement in the ReGenesis Environmental Justice Partnership, make for an important case study.

Background

Located in upstate South Carolina, Spartanburg is a former textile-mill town turned

regional industrial hub. Spartanburg and Spartanburg County host some of the nation's fastest-growing corporations and several internationally owned firms. A major new public/private downtown revitalization effort, the Renaissance Park project, features a 250-room hotel/conference center, pedestrian malls, offices, an arts center, and other amenities (Sandlapper, 2002). By most accounts, the region is thriving.

The city's Arkwright and Forest Park neighborhoods have a less happy story to tell. They are adjacent to two Superfund-caliber sites: the former International Minerals and Chemicals (IMC) fertilizer plant and the Arkwright dump. Also located nearby are an operating chemical plant, an operating textile manufacturer, concrete production businesses, and other commercial and industrial facilities. Because of a lack of zoning restrictions and few land use controls in the area, these sites are near residential housing and, in some cases, share fence lines with homeowners.

During the 1990s, criminal activity around the IMC site alarmed a nearby resident. While investigating what could be done to combat crime, resident Harold Mitchell discovered that a number of environmental contamination complaints about the IMC site had been filed with the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.

This discovery led to neighborhood-wide discussions of the health risks the site might pose. These neighborhoods had a history of high death rates from cancer and respiratory diseases, as well as high rates of infant mortality, miscarriages, and birth defects. As awareness of the hazards grew, so did momentum to get the site cleaned up.

Birth of ReGenesis

In 1997, residents attended the first of many community meetings held to discuss environmental contamination. Questions about what contaminants might be found at the dump site surfaced in 1998. That same year, Harold Mitchell founded ReGenesis, a community-based environmental justice organization, to provide leadership and to represent neighborhood interests in the effort to assess and clean up the two sites.

ReGenesis worked with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state environmental agency to assess levels of contamination, and a plan for cleanup followed. During these discussions, the idea of redeveloping Arkwright and Forest Park gained support.

As the focus of ReGenesis evolved, the organization continued to link other entities from the public and private sectors into the revitalization efforts. Several public forums in 2000 brought together stakeholders from federal and state agencies, business and industry, universities, and other interested parties and ultimately led to the formation of the ReGenesis Environmental Justice Partnership.

Two local partners—Spartanburg County and the city of Spartanburg—joined with ReGenesis to form a core steering committee for the partnership. In addition to Mitchell representing ReGenesis, Elena Rush, director of Spartanburg

County's community and economic development department (CEDD), and Mike Garrett, former city engineer for Spartanburg and current public works director for Spartanburg County, made up the committee. These three stakeholders decided early on to hold regular meetings to keep communication flowing and to coordinate activities among members of the larger partnership effort.

This committee handles planning for partnership meetings and community forums, which are usually held in conjunction with each other. Partnership meetings involve representatives from federal and state government, business and industry, and other interested parties, whereas community forums are held mostly for the benefit of neighborhood residents.

Before each round of meetings, the team lays out the respective meeting agendas and determines which issues need to be addressed. Team members also serve as sounding boards for each other on how to approach certain issues. For example, the committee tailors the agendas to their potential audiences. Technical details are summarized, and consultants are available to provide explanations and keep the discussions focused.

County's Involvement and Response

From the outset of the county's involvement in the partnership, County Administrator Jim Hartmann and Elena Rush could see that a number of relationships needed to be built and/or strengthened to respond to and address the environmental justice issues being brought forward.

They determined that there needed to be better coordination within county government, with other governments, and with community-based organizations and neighborhood groups. Together, they worked to develop several new processes and encouraged these processes to be institutionalized within county government.

Internal coordination. In 2000, the establishment of the Spartanburg County Community and Economic Development Department (CEDD) brought a new focus to community development issues in the county. The emergence of the ReGenesis Environmental Justice Partnership has served to drive home the need for the office and the community development services it provides.

Hartmann has championed community development and environmental justice efforts with the county council,

garnering its support of CEDD. He also appointed Rush as the single point of contact for the county on environmental justice issues, and she coordinates the county's efforts with the other agencies and departments.

With support from Hartmann, Rush established a Community Development Task Force, with representatives from 11 county departments and agencies, to take a more comprehensive approach to community development concerns with the county. The task force has taken up a variety of issues, everything from demolishing abandoned and substandard housing to doing targeted and comprehensive neighborhood code enforcement.

During task-force meetings, Rush reports out to department heads about community development and environmental justice concerns within the county, focusing attention on how the other departments can support these efforts within the scope of their respective missions. One Arkwright resident, for example, came to her about a large pothole near a street-and-railroad intersection. Rush coordinated with the public works department and the local railroad, and the repair was made within two weeks. Rush says dealing with such issues "is a normal part of our work."

Intergovernmental coordination. For many years, the city and county did not have a good track record for establishing cooperative relationships on joint projects, and public controversies between the two were common. Poor communications between the two governments appeared to be a major contributing factor.

Prior to his arrival, Hartmann had conversations with Roy Lane, then Spartanburg's city manager, which helped form a solid working relationship. The two men undertook a joint effort to push for more and better information sharing between city and county government and made it a practice to hold weekly lunch meetings with each other. Hartmann has kept up the practice with Lane's successor, Mark Scott.

Hartmann and Lane encouraged their respective staffs to develop deeper professional relationships. They hosted joint training sessions to allow staff to come closer together. Hartmann notes that cooperation between the two governments is now almost an automatic function.

Rush says that coordination with state and federal government has been a bit more challenging. She points out that many agencies are much larger than her small department, and, as a result, agency staff only understand their specific portion of the

project and not the entire scope of what is happening.

Because multiple departments within the agencies are often involved, different agendas exist for working with the community. And Rush notes that personnel turnover in the agencies has had an impact on redevelopment efforts. But she also notes that the core steering committee has tried to counteract these challenges by providing regular e-mail correspondence to all stakeholders. The steering committee also schedules a number of events in Spartanburg so that partners can see how the different projects work together.

Coordination with the neighborhoods. When the ReGenesis effort began, residents of Arkwright and Forest Park lacked an understanding of the city and the county's respective roles and responsibilities. The two local governments also had a learning curve to go through to understand the needs and wants of the neighborhoods.

When Mitchell first approached Rush, he wanted to know what it would take to build a new road in the neighborhoods. Rush told him that roads were not within her department's scope of work but followed up with her contacts to determine who Mitchell needed to see. She also briefed him on what her department did, and Mitchell invited her to attend one of the ReGenesis-sponsored community forums. Only after this dialogue began did the neighborhood residents start to see the county and city as their allies. As Rush puts it, "We all began to see the bigger picture."

The core steering committee has worked diligently to show neighborhood residents the whole redevelopment process. Committee members purposely stayed away from assigning work to subcommittees, in an effort to promote greater accountability and transparency in the decision-making processes.

Stakeholders in the ReGenesis partnership developed 12 specific elements for its workplan. At each partnership meeting, status reports are given on each element of the workplan. By making the reports a public and ongoing component of the meetings, all the stakeholders hold each other accountable for the work of the group.

There has also been an effort to make sure that residents are not led down a path of false expectations. One of the biggest concerns for residents is the development of alternative road access into the area, but building new highways takes considerable time and money before concrete and asphalt can be laid.

Talking to residents about realistic time frames, and keeping them informed of how plans are progressing, are steps central to preparing agendas for all community meetings. As Hartmann notes, "We've worked real hard to develop the relationships and trust."

New ICMA Report on Environmental Justice

The ReGenesis Environmental Justice Partnership in Spartanburg, South Carolina, is one of four collaborative partnerships studied by ICMA researchers in the newly released report Not Business as Usual: Using Collaborative Partnerships to Address Environmental Justice Issues. Funding for the case-study research and report came from the Ford Foundation.

In the report, ICMA researchers Cory Fleming and Katrena Hanks present 12 major findings to guide the thinking of community leaders in forming environmental justice collaborative partnerships. From discussing the challenges of

environmental justice as a community organizing issue to stressing the importance of local government involvement for the long-term sustainability of a partnership, the report provides clear examples of how environmental justice collaborative partnerships can create change in communities.

Four communities from across the United States participated in the study:

- Anniston, Alabama, and the Vision 2020 Children's Health Environmental Justice Partnership.
- San Diego, California, and the Barrio Logan Environmental Justice Partnership.
- Spartanburg, South Carolina, and the ReGenesis Environmental Justice Partnership.
- Washington, D.C., and the Bridges to Friendship Environmental Justice Partnership.

The report may be accessed free of charge on a Web site sponsored by ICMA at BrownfieldSource.org.

City's Involvement and Response

Spartanburg's involvement with the partnership has centered primarily around the assessment and cleanup of the Arkwright dump. The city managed the dump from 1954 until 1972. Modern waste management practices were not in place during those years, and little oversight was devoted to the site, which was capped with only a thin layer of topsoil when the dump closed (U.S.EPA, 2003).

As the former owner and potentially responsible party (PRP), the city signed a consent order with the U.S. EPA in 1999 and spent $1.2 million on a remedial investigation to determine what materials were in the dump.

William Barnet, Spartanburg's mayor, says unequivocally that the city will "meet its legal obligations . . . [and] intends to do what's right." In addition to Mike Garrett, the former city engineer, serving on the ReGenesis core steering committee, the city provided grant-writing assistance and served as an administrative entity for several neighborhood improvement grants.

According to Barnet, when environmental justice is on the public agenda, the focus cannot be "on a battle, but rather determining how to fix the problem."

Successes of the Partnership

The partnership has brought considerable external funding to the area. It has garnered nearly $7.5 million in grant funds for the community, and recently a grant application for nearly $20 million in HOPE VI funding was submitted to construct new affordable housing in the neighborhoods.

In 2002, the city, county, and ReGenesis signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that details the roles and responsibilities of each entity in the revitalization of Arkwright and Forest Park, also limiting the liability of each organization to the value of the grants received. Hartmann comments, "Essentially, we wanted to have a formal agreement institutionalizing the expectations of ReGenesis, the city, and the county."

In the few short years since its formation, the partnership has achieved much,

including the establishment of the ReGenesis Community Health Center (CHC) in 2003. CHC serves not only the residents of Arkwright and Forest Park but also the greater Spartanburg community.

In the first three months of its operation, CHC staff reported treating nearly 2,400 patients. Stakeholders in the partnership also helped secure "weed-and-seed" funding from the U.S. Department of Justice to help tackle criminal activity in the neighborhoods. Six brownfields sites have been assessed as part of a major redevelopment plan for the area.

Other elements of this plan include negotiations with the South Carolina Department of Transportation on the design of a new roadway to provide alternate emergency access to the neighborhoods, and a proposal for a business development and entrepreneurial training program for residents to give them greater access to the new economic opportunities presented by the redevelopment plan.

EJ Fact
The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."

Benefits for Local Government

Increased confidence in county government is perhaps one of the biggest benefits Spartanburg County has realized from its community development and environmental justice efforts. Polling in the county has shown rising levels of resident satisfaction with the services provided by county government.

While the increased satisfaction cannot be tied directly to involvement in the ReGenesis partnership, the changes in management and increased emphasis on teamwork are certainly showcased in the county's response to it. From the city's standpoint, Barnet sees the redevelopment efforts taking place in Arkwright and Forest Park as contributing to the long-term health of the broader community. While acknowledging that there are political and geographic boundaries that separate the city and the county, he also recognizes the importance of providing leadership for the community as a whole.

Through ReGenesis, Barnet hopes that per capita income can be raised, new jobs created, more investments made in children and children's education, and housing quality improved. Everyone stands to benefit if the vision of the ReGenesis partnership can be turned into an economic reality.

"The public intuitively understands that conflict wastes resources," Hartmann says. While the circumstances leading to the formation of the partnership were on a few occasions less than pleasant, he feels that the experience has encouraged improved teamwork among county staff, built stronger relationships between city and county government, and allowed for tremendous professional and personal growth for many of the stakeholders in the partnership.

Hartmann also quickly points out that much of this work came about as the result of one community activist, Harold Mitchell, who took the lead in getting neighborhood residents involved in making their community a better place. "Working with community activists is critical," says Hartmann. "Probably, the most important thing we've learned is how to approach these challenges collectively." All in all, Hartmann counts the experience as a positive one for Spartanburg County.

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Author’s Note: Portions of this article were drawn from a new ICMA report, *Not Business as Usual: Using Collaborative Partnerships to Address Environmental Justice Issues*. Financial support for the case-study research and report came from the Ford Foundation. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ford Foundation.

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Pushing Another Envelope by Monika Hudson and Sharifa Wilson
“When your house is on fire, do not sit around trying to figure out what caused the fire, put it out.” —Nigerian proverb

With everything else on their plates, where should the issue of environmental justice “live” for public officials—specifically, city and county councilmembers and managers? This question has particular poignancy in communities that have been traditionally disenfranchised such as East Palo Alto, Richmond, East Oakland, Compton, and East Los Angeles in California; Maywood and East St, Louis, Illinois; Benton Harbor, Michigan; Camden, New Jersey; Corpus Christi and Port Arthur, Texas, and other localities or sections of localities where there are concentrations of African-Americans or Hispanics. (There is a slightly ironic twist to the fact that so many of these communities are located east of geographically wealthier areas, separated only by a railroad track or highway).

For public officials, the policy response to environmental contamination has concurrently been colored by ethnicity. If asked, administrators of color almost intuitively will link environmental justice to leading and managing communities impacted by current and historical racism. As former public officials of color, the authors would argue that to leave it there—to simply say racism—ignores our responsibility to facilitate positive change both within our immediate local areas as well as generally within the field of public policy.

Are we simply being idealistic? After all, environmental contamination usually has historical perpetrators—manufacturers who used then-current technologies, military bases, and/or municipal waste disposal sites—and historical or new victims. The victims are usually poorly informed about currently known hazards associated with various historical land uses, typically discovering them by accident.

This lack of information traditionally leads to adversarial situations that are exacerbated by the communities’ tendencies to view the perpetrators as having done something to them intentionally. It would be easy to simply ride that horse.

The challenge is to concurrently remember that, as residents of these same communities, we come to positions of leadership and management for the purpose of leading and managing. That requires a mindset that values positive action, not just continuing in the cycle of "ain't it awful."

A Good Example

The transformation that we led and managed in East Palo Alto, California, arose out of this concept of the public trust, as did the changes initiated in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and other communities across the United States. It comes from a notion that the solutions to major environmental concerns can only be generated when the community's residents began to see themselves as part of the solution.

In the case of East Palo Alto, the city council provided the initial leadership that redirected residents from a focus on the brownsfields problem to a focus on leveraging relationships to create new partnerships and future-oriented coalitions. Internal and consultant staff worked with English and non-English speaking community members to develop an inclusive redevelopment vision for several industrially contaminated areas. East Palo Alto councilmembers and staff partnered with county, state, and federal agencies to obtain training and employment resources to tackle environmental cleanup and subsequently create environmentally-related business opportunities for local residents in the site that was cleaned up.

Based on our experience, we would encourage public officials to make a concerted effort to provide environmental education and training so that residents have the information they need to combat the fears that otherwise halt much forward progress. The purpose of such an effort is to truly empower adults and youth by helping them understand how the environmental contamination occurs, while concurrently encouraging them to think in a future-tense action mode.

We believe that when historically disenfranchised communities leverage the experience of elders with the idealistic energy of young people, the notion of empowerment is more than just a catchphrase. It becomes an engrained mindset that can propel a community forward. The East Palo Alto experiment showed us that this is particularly important in cities undergoing rapid ethnic, economic, social, language, and age diversity, where the focus could have been on individual differences rather than on common concerns.

We would offer that the revitalization of our community rested more upon encouraging a diversity of thoughts and opinions as solutions were identified, rather than listening to only one set of voices. We are pleased to have been part of the effort that allowed a multicultural East Palo Alto to embody the Nigerian proverb, rather than just quote it.

Monika Hudson, managing principal, The MGT Group, Millbrae, California (mgtgrp@cwnet.com), is a former city manager of East Palo Alto (sharifa@collegetrack.org), California. Sharifa Wilson, former city councilmember, East Palo Alto, is program director for College Track East Palo Alto, an after-school program focusing on getting high school students of color into college.

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Ethics Inquiries

Can the Retiring Manager Serve on the City Council?

Scenario: Shortly after the city manager announced his retirement after 30 years of service, a citizen group let him know that the group had endorsed him for a vacant seat on the city council. While serving in an elected position had not been part of his retirement plans, the manager finds he is intrigued with the idea. He did not attend any of the citizen group meetings nor did he ask for its endorsement. The seat is vacant due to the untimely death of a well-regarded councilmember, and the appointment would give him a year of experience as an elected official. The council makes the appointment, and it does not need to act until after the city manager retires. What ethical issues should the city manager consider in these circumstances?

Response: Until the city manager retires, he is expected to abide by Tenet 7 of the ICMA Code of Ethics and its restrictions on political activity. This means he should not actively seek this office or any endorsements. He cannot raise campaign funds, sign or circulate petitions, or any other prohibited activity.

Once he has left his city manager post, he can engage in political activities if he so chooses. As a retired city manager, he is required to support Tenets 1 and 3, which outline the member's responsibility to support democratic local government and to maintain the highest ideals of honor and integrity.

Baseball Tickets from Heaven

Scenario: The county government has a strict law that prohibits employees from accepting any gift valued over $25. In practice, the only gifts that are accepted are cookies that arrive during the holiday season. The police chief stopped by today to let the county manager know about an anonymous gift that was left in an envelope with the police dispatchers. The gift includes several tickets and parking passes for a popular baseball game.

Since no one knows who left the tickets, it is impossible to identify anyone who might seek to influence the county government. The county manager was inclined to go ahead and distribute the tickets to employees but wanted to be sure she wasn't overlooking any obvious ethical issues.

Response: Although it is possible that someone could make an allegation later that they left the tickets in an effort to curry favor with county employees, no one is known to be seeking to influence the county government. The county manager could contact the baseball ticket vendor to see if it is possible to identify the purchaser.

For example, if these are season tickets owned by a company that does business with the county, the county's gift law might be violated if they were accepted. If the county manager is uncomfortable in distributing the tickets to employees, she might ask the employees if they would like to give them to a charity. Some police departments take an active role with boys' and girls' clubs and might like them to enjoy this unexpected gift.

Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The inquiries and advice are reviewed by the Committee on Professional Conduct, the ethics committee of the ICMA Executive Board. Some of the inquiries are revised and published as a regular feature in *PM*, to give guidance to members in the big and little ethical decisions they make daily. If you have a question about your obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics, call Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611, e-mail, ekellar@icma.org or Martha Perego at 202/962-3668, e-mail, mperego@icma.org.

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Profile:
Challenge: Manager Focuses on Jobs

Steve Wyatt, county manager of Moore County, North Carolina, holds a birthday gift from his staff.

Steve Wyatt is a man who believes in winning, whether it's in the field of economic development or water improvements. The Moore County, North Carolina, manager says that Moore County is a big county with an excellent product to sell.

"Americans are programmed to win. Anything other than winning is unacceptable. Am I an optimist? Yes, I am," he said. "We're blessed with the greatest nation in the world, and we're going to win. We owe it to the people in our past and to the people in our future."

Right now, the challenge is finding jobs—in Moore County and just about

everywhere else. Wyatt came to Moore County from Catawba County, [North Carolina,] where he served 13 years as deputy manager. His experience with economic development taught him that a community must rethink its strategy in order to compete in today's changing job market.

For most of the 1990s, Catawba County rocked along on its long-time base of textiles and furniture, boosted by a strong infusion of telecommunications. But by the end of the decade, company inventories had piled up and the demand for products plummeted. The unemployment rate quadrupled from 2 percent-plus to more than 8 percent.

Catawba County leaders realized their community could not compete with the pay scale in Asian countries and other countries with low or nonexistent regulations on safety and environmental issues. Wyatt points out that we pay for the protections of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, agencies that many countries do not have.

Wyatt says that leaders must make up their minds to do things differently, and that means change. "Everybody deals with change differently. We don't embrace change easily. There's one sure thing in life, and that's change," Wyatt said. The manager says we must keep up with the quickening pace of change. "You either ride the wave or you drown," he said.

The picture improved considerably in Catawba County with the arrival of new fiber optic companies, but Wyatt insists that he did not solve the problem in Catawba County. In fact, it's not a situation where a problem will ever be completely solved.

"Government is a work in progress. Your marriage is a work in progress. Your family is a work in progress. You don't just fix things when they go wrong. When you think you've fixed it, someone comes along and changes the rules," Wyatt said. "The challenge is for the people who can make a difference to take a look at the situation and decide how to handle the situation differently."

More Jobs Needed

Jobs remain the sticking point with the economy. Otherwise, Wyatt says, the economy is not doing badly. Inflation is comfortably under control, the stock market has rebounded, but people still do not have jobs. The economy will not become robust until jobs are available.

Job growth today is seen in small businesses, not the traditional large industries that hire thousands. Wyatt says that Moore County is open for opportunities, but a major weakness is transportation. The county is not located on an interstate highway, and there is no commercial air service here. And air service means more to Moore County than it means to most counties because of its large resort and tourism elements. However, there are positive sides to these obstacles.

For one thing, progress is being made toward securing commercial air passenger service. And the county lies on the fringe of the future Interstate 73/74, being developed along the U.S. 220 route, and U.S. 1, which passes through Aberdeen and Southern Pines, is a four-lane highway through much of the county and will soon be almost at interstate standards. "We have an incredible brand to sell, and that is Pinehurst," Wyatt said. "But you have to get people there."

Wyatt says the name Pinehurst is known worldwide, especially in corporate

boardrooms. The name will become even more popular by 2005, when Pinehurst again hosts the U.S. Open. “These are people who have money and make decisions,” he said. We cannot afford to drop that ball,” he said.

Fragmentation

In his study of his county, Wyatt says he has seen another disadvantage in fragmentation. That’s mostly because of the county’s large size from a geographical standpoint—701 square miles sprawling from the Sandhills in the east and south to the red clay Piedmont in the north and west. The population is almost 78,000, centered in Southern Pines, Pinehurst, and Aberdeen but also spread out among eight other small municipalities.

But the county’s size and diversity can be turned into an advantage. “We have a wonderful mix here for corporate people to live—golf, or places to get away from it all, or the equestrian areas,” Wyatt said.

The CEOs of small dynamic businesses don’t run their businesses by remote control. They like to be there in person. Wyatt sees Moore County as an ideal place for such businesses to establish their headquarters as well as a place for top personnel to live. He has attended only one meeting of Partners for Progress, but so far he thinks Partners is heading in the right direction. [At the time this story was written in 2003,] Partners is looking for an executive director, and this is an important step toward future success.

The key ingredients, he said, are leadership and consensus. At this point, Partners for Progress appears to be moving in the right direction.

“Fragmentation can kill economic development,” he said. But he doesn’t think that will happen.

Economic Development

“I’m excited about the potential for a new economic development director here,” Wyatt says. “The structure for economic development is not important, whether it is Partners for Progress, a cooperative community effort, the Chamber of Commerce, or the county. What is important is the thrust of the leadership to focus on success.”

The manager takes the same approach to the county’s water situation. He says partnerships are already in place that involves the county and 11 municipalities. Rains have replenished groundwater levels faster than expected, and this is a good time to direct attention toward cooperative efforts. After all, the county and the municipalities worked in a spirit of cooperation last summer when there was a statewide water crisis.

What kind of manager is Wyatt? Wyatt said he has been spending more time in the office than he wants to and signing too many papers. He believes in spreading out authority and in accountability and in what he calls “point-of-service decision making.” His solution for achieving the best level of accountability is to make sure the county hires the best people to do the work.

“I’m too far from the paramedics at the scene of an emergency to tell them what to do. I want to make sure we have the best paramedics, the best planners, the best enforcement personnel, the best sheriff’s deputies,” he said.

Strategic Thinker

Wyatt calls himself “a fairly strategic thinker and planner” who likes to solve problems. He does not plan to micromanage. Instead, he wants to hire the best people, based on their talent, and then put them in a position to be winners. He wants to be a resource for them but a resource only, not the one who tells them everything to be done. “If I have to tell somebody how to do it, I don’t need them,” he said. “I’m high on accountability. Individuals have to be accountable.”

He trades autonomy for accountability. “The outcome is the key word,” he said. “I’m interested in the outcome.”

“We have some good professional people, and they know how to do their jobs. I expect them to do their jobs and have results. The commissioners are accountable to the voters every four years, and I’m accountable to the commissioners.”

When he’s not on the job, Wyatt’s main focus is his family: wife, Susan, and daughter Callie. They [sold] their Catawba County home in order to move to Monroe County with their seven horses. Wyatt says the horses are more a family interest than his own, and he is a casual golfer, at best. He believes in physical fitness and gets enough exercise to stay in good shape.

A Carolina Panthers fan, Wyatt also enjoys serving his alma mater, Appalachian State University (ASU), where he earned his undergraduate degree in public administration. He assists ASU by working with special committees and the alumni association.

But a primary concern of the Wyatt’s is a ministry with needy children overseas. For one of those programs, they hosted a child from Belarus, a former part of the Soviet Union and now an independent country. This child’s family lives in an area downwind of Chernobyl in the neighboring Ukraine, site of a major nuclear plant tragedy a number of years ago. As a result of the escaping radiation, the girl’s mother died of cancer at an early age. “She spent her summers with us,” he said. “It was a very sobering thing. They have so little.”

The program, ABRO, is the American Belarus Relief Organization, an interdenominational Christian ministry. But Belarus is not the only country through which the Wyatts have carried their ministry. Poland and Japan are among the others. He and his wife have also worked with a prison ministry and last year handled the “angel tree” for the children of prisoners. “We played Santa Claus for prisoners’ children in Catawba County,” Wyatt said. “It was an extremely bittersweet experience.”

Wyatt, who came to work in Moore County on May 19, [2003,] holds a master of public affairs degree from Western Carolina University. He also holds a Certificate of Municipal Administration from the Institute of Government of the University of North Carolina.

Prior to his work in Catawba County, Wyatt was Polk County, North Carolina, manager. Earlier management positions were in Chadbourn and Kingstree, South Carolina. He is a native of Marion, in McDowell County, North Carolina.

Florence Gilkeson, Senior Writer, The Pilot, Southern Pines, North Carolina

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