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Article published Aug 2, 2005

WENTWORTH -- The Rockingham County commissioners approved \$253,222 in economic incentives Monday over the objection of three county residents who spoke against what they called "corporate welfare."

The commissioners also gave County Manager Tom Robinson permission to solicit qualifications for an architect for the county's new courthouse, adopted rules for public comment sessions and addressed several water and sewer matters.

Lisa Perry, president of the Rockingham County Partnership for Economic and Tourism Development, told the board that the three companies plan to invest \$10.6 million in the county and create at least 398 jobs during the next seven years. The companies are MGM Transport of Eden, and Burlington Industries and Ameri-Kart, both in Reidsville.

Rockingham County gave them post-performance incentives in the form of a portion of their county taxes back if they create the jobs and make the investments.

Speaking against the incentives were Richard Moore and Eric Smith, both of Reidsville, and Beverly Wilcox of Wentworth.

"It is ethically and morally wrong to force a small business owner and homeowner to subsidize the profits of a large private company," Moore told the board.

His sentiments were echoed by Smith and Wilcox, who said the board should not give tax breaks to multimillion-dollar companies.

But board members told the three that, while they might agree with them in principle, they can't stop giving incentives to companies when other states and counties offer them incentives.

"I've said before I don't like the way the game is played, but it's going to take someone with higher power than us to change it," Commissioner Keith Duncan told the three.

Commissioner Bert Jones said he understood the speakers' viewpoint and would like to see the incentive system declared illegal.

"I do think it is basically wrong. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. A county like us can't compete for the Dells of this world like some of the counties with a larger piece of the pie," Jones said.

But citizens expect the board to help bring jobs to the county, and, "in this case, the good outweighs the bad."

The board also dealt with several water and sewer matters such as approving up to \$500,000 for Eden's sewer improvements along N.C. 14. The city will pay up to \$500,000 and will use a grant to

pay the rest of the \$1.5 million project.

Commissioners also learned that increases in the city of Eden's water rates could mean substantial increases in what the county, Wentworth schools and Rockingham Community College pay in water costs next year.

Tom Wagoner, director of the Environmental and Engineering Department, said Eden has voted to increase its water and sewer flat rate charge by 30 percent and its volume charge by 9 percent.

Wentworth buys its water from Eden and resells it to residents.

While the increases per household will mean less than \$10 a month, the formula applied to the county means an additional \$11,000 a year for the county, \$17,000 a year for the schools and \$4,500 a year for the college, Wagoner said. Because Eden didn't notify the county about the increase, the money has not been budgeted.

"It is a pretty big jump and the timing of it is poor," Robinson told the board.

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