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## Residents await help with water supply

**By Greg Barnes**  
Staff writer

One night in late July, Eric Hendricks stood up at a Fayetteville City Council forum and asked what the city planned to do about the contaminated groundwater near Rim and Old Raeford roads.

“A lot of finger-pointing has been going on, and we have taxpayers dying,” Hendricks told the City Council.

Hendricks talked about the benzene that has been in some private wells at least since February 1988, the day Robert Fludd complained about the smell of gasoline in his well water.

“Help us,” Hendricks pleaded. “Bring the water here.”

Fayetteville City Manager Dale Iman was dumbfounded. Iman said he had never heard about the contamination before that day.

In early November, after intense negotiations led the state to commit about \$136,000, Iman said the contaminated site would soon get a public water line.

“The end of the 20- to 30-year mess in that part of the city is nearing an end,” Iman said.

But across Cumberland County near Hope Mills — in another low-income neighborhood known as Brooklyn Circle — the state, the county and the Fayetteville Public Works Commission have done little to help residents whose wells were contaminated with a gasoline additive called methyl tertiary-butyl ether.

The contamination — and the threat to private water wells in the area — was so serious that the state gave the site a priority ranking of 1,000, the highest in the county and double the ranking for the Rim Road site.

The contamination was discovered in April 2006. Well samplings in December and January of this year found that the contamination had fallen below the level considered dangerous.

But there is no guarantee that it won't return. Hassan Osman, the state hydrogeologist responsible for overseeing the area, still recommends that a public water line be extended to the area.

Originally, the state's Underground Storage Tank Section thought the contamination was coming from an old gas station at Brooklyn Circle and U.S. 301. But the gas station closed in 1978, a year before the methyl tertiary-butyl ether — or MTBE — became widely used to increase octane in unleaded gas.

The verdict is still out on the potential health effects of MTBE, but some scientists say it could lead to cancer and kidney and liver damage if ingested over many years.

The source of the MTBE remains a mystery. Osman said it may be flowing into a creek behind the

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affected homes. But the creek bed is now dry because of the drought, and the MTBE could return with heavy rains, he said. MTBE is highly soluble and travels faster and farther in groundwater than other gasoline components.

Osman said he will monitor the area for the next year before determining whether the water is safe to drink. Until then, four residents along Brooklyn Circle will continue to drink bottled water or use an expensive filtration system supplied by the state.

One of the four wells was so contaminated with MTBE that a state toxicologist told the property owner not to use the water for any purpose — not even for bathing.

The reasons

The reason officials give for not cleaning up the Brooklyn Circle site or extending public water to the area is a lack of money. But another reason — based on interviews and scores of government documents — is a reluctance on the part of the county, the state and the PWC to work together to find a solution.

Tom Cooney, the county's public utilities director, and Steve Blanchard, the PWC's general manager, sat in on the meetings in which the city found money for the Rim Road contamination.

Not once, Cooney and Blanchard acknowledged, did anyone discuss helping the Brooklyn Circle residents during those meetings.

And not once, Cooney said, has he explored whether state and federal loans or grants might be available to extend a public water line to the area.

"We'd love to help them," Cooney said. "The bottom line is cost. Water and sewer projects are very expensive."

Last year, the PWC estimated it would cost \$115,968 to run an 8-inch water line to Brooklyn Circle.

State and federal officials who oversee money for contaminated sites say that although grant money is difficult to come by these days, it is available for emergencies. Loans also are available, they say.

"Certainly when you are talking about \$200,000, that's really not much when you are talking about infrastructure," said Bob Taylor of the Southeast Rural Community Assistance Loan Fund Program.

Without government help, Ellie Felton, who lives at 201 Brooklyn Circle, will continue to receive bottled water. Before the last tests, Felton's well was found to contain MTBE at nearly 12 times the level the state considers safe for drinking.

"You can't live like this for so long," said Felton, whose husband suffered from Crohn's disease and died Nov. 2, 2006. Felton grabbed his death certificate and slowly pronounced the medical term for his cause of death: thrombocytopenia.

"He bled to death," said Felton, who wonders whether the well contamination is to blame.

"We had been cooking, drinking, everything, with this water since 1991," she said.

Brooklyn Circle lies off U.S. 301, just south of Tom Starling Road outside the city limits. A PWC water main runs down U.S. 301 and extends to two homes on Brooklyn Circle before stopping abruptly.

A year after the contamination was discovered in early 2006, Cooney received a letter from Osman, the hydrogeologist with the state Underground Storage Tank Section in Raleigh.

“The best, long-term solution is to connect the affected homes to the public water line, which requires the extension of a water line to the Brooklyn Circle area,” Osman wrote. “This would provide safe water to all residents, those with contaminated wells and those that are at high risk for contaminants.”

Osman said public utilities in Robeson, Johnston and other counties have quickly found money to extend water lines to contaminated areas. That has not been the case in Cumberland County, he said.

Osman said he met personally with county and PWC officials last year to get them to pay to extend the line to Brooklyn Circle residents.

“They never compromised on anything,” he said.

Shortly after that meeting, documents show, the county and the PWC sent letters to homeowners living on or near Brooklyn Circle asking whether they would be willing to pay to hook up to a public water line. The residents were told they would have to pay the full cost up front.

Of the 100 letters sent by the county, Cooney said, six were returned. Three people wanted public water and three didn't.

A separate survey by the PWC broke down the amount of money each homeowner would have to pay for public water — \$6,821.65 — before any work would begin.

The PWC survey drew a similar response. People on Brooklyn Circle have limited incomes — and most of them have clean drinking water now. They didn't want to pay for the line.

1990 discovery

The state has known about contamination at the former Brooklyn Service Station since 1990. It took over cleanup responsibilities in 1996. But other than monitoring and sampling the pollution, the state has done little to remove it.

In 2001, the state hired an environmental company called Handex to conduct more tests. Handex concluded that the site should be classified as high risk because 16 private water wells lie within 1,000 feet of it. The company recommended that more tests be performed to determine the potential effects on the private wells. It also suggested annual sampling of those wells.

None of that was done because the state didn't have the money, Osman said.

Another environmental company, Groundwater Management Associates, returned in April 2006 and conducted an expanded survey of the contamination.

That company found the MTBE in the four private wells along Brooklyn Circle.

After the discovery, state toxicologist Ken Rudo recommended that the people living at 169, 201 and 225 Brooklyn Circle not drink their water, cook with it or bathe in it for more than five minutes.

Rudo wrote to Ed Hayter, who owned the home at 173 Brooklyn Circle: “Any continued water use for any purpose may pose an increased health risk. DO NOT USE THIS WATER!”

The MTBE in Hayter's well measured 22 times the level the state considers safe.

Since the contamination was discovered, the state has provided bottled water to Felton and Linda Kostro, at 225 Brooklyn Circle. It installed a filtration system at Chris and Amy Schmidt's home at 169 Brooklyn Circle. A filtration system was installed for Hayter, but it was removed after he drilled a deep well and put his house up for sale.

Nothing more has been done.

“That is not our responsibility,” Osman has said repeatedly. “That is the county’s or the city’s responsibility.”

Cooney disagrees.

“They are trying to pass the buck to the county,” he said.

In the past, Osman has brokered deals to help Cumberland County residents with contaminated wells. In 2005, the state paid 60 percent of the \$23,060 cost to extend a water line to residents of Toggel Avenue, near Stoney Point Road, where gasoline contamination was detected years earlier. The PWC paid the remaining cost.

That same year, Osman used about \$40,000 in state money to drill new wells for Brenda Baker and Brian Corbie, whose water was contaminated by leaking underground storage tanks from the Pit Stop store on U.S. 301 near the Robeson County line.

But Osman said he doesn’t have the money for larger projects such as Brooklyn Circle.

Brooklyn Circle residents only have to look to Rim Road to see what their future may hold. It took 20 years to get a commitment to extend a water line there, and that commitment did not come without a fight.

In the Rim Road case, the city decided to help the property owners. In little time, money was found to help provide them with public water.

Cooney, the county’s public utilities director, said he has never applied for state or federal grants or loans for Brooklyn Circle because he did not think any existed.

Told in early December that money for Brooklyn Circle likely is available, Cooney asked for and received telephone numbers of contacts who could assist him.

The contacts were Taylor, of the Southeast Rural Community Assistance Loan Fund Program, and Sid Harrell, an environmental engineer with the state’s Division of Environmental Health.

Taylor said his agency probably could not provide money for Brooklyn Circle because of federal restrictions.

“But,” Taylor said, “we can work as a referral service and probably find them some money for the project.”

Harrell said his agency might be able to provide money through the Bernard Allen Emergency Drinking Water Fund or the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center. He said he likely could get the county a loan at 2.1 percent interest over 20 years. The loan application deadline is March 31.

Taylor and Harrell said they have never heard from Cooney.

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