History of the
Winston-Salem/Forsyth County
Utility Commission

1994

Amended
2009, 2020, 2022

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The following pages document the history of the City/County Utility Commission of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. It begins with the formation of the Commission in 1976, describing events and individuals who have contributed to its creation and growth.

What this glimpse does not capture is the dramatic sense of empowerment to staff members by the Utility Commission. In the early days of the Commission, I was a frequent visitor to John Watlington’s office where he so clearly stated the expectations he had for the Commission. His confidence, trust and support were very clearly given. Although not spoken, it was just as clear that failure was not an option. Other commissioners, especially that first group of committee chairmen, were smart, hardworking business people who made tough decisions which created the opportunity for us to accomplish heights beyond our expectation. It is this contribution by former Utility Commission Members that has positioned the organization to be one of the few AAA bonds rated public utilities in the United States.

This community is indebted to those members who have given their energy and commitment to create the successful organization we have today. Moreover, the staff is grateful for the leadership provided by former Commission Members, as well as their contributions to staff’s professional development.

It is important to appreciate the legacy inherited from those who worked so diligently to build a solid foundation for the City/County Utility Commission. It is equally important to appreciate today’s Commissioners who continue the pursuit of excellence.

P. W. Swann
Assistant City Manager/Public Works
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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 1778-1994

In 1778, the Village of Salem installed 332 wooden rods of water pipes. The cost of these pipes was approximately $2,000.00 and the average citizen compensated the village at a rate of 9 pence per four weeks, regardless of the usage. Later, these wooden pipes were replaced with clay and still later the pipes were replaced with iron and a cistern in an attempt at providing the best possible service. This glimpse of the area’s oldest utilities management shows how service was a primary issue for local governing officials. The desire to serve constituents effectively and efficiently was an important value back in 1778 that remains today. By the mid-1970s, City of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County Officials were faced with considerable water and wastewater service challenges. Thus, consolidation of the two separate water systems became an option to consider.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, City and County leaders begin talking about consolidation. This need was confirmed by an engineering firm, Piatt and Davis, who was hired to review the situation and the demographics. They recommended that all water and wastewater services be placed under a single authority that would not necessarily be identified with the county or a municipality. From this recommendation, committees were formed but talks stalled until late 1973 when a new committee was established. This group was faced with the subject of timing, because by then, there was no doubt that consolidation would occur. Discussions continued through various committees and negotiations. In April 1976, an abruptly called special meeting brought the issue to a close. Consolidation was approved, albeit by a very narrow margin. Along with consolidation came provisions such as the following: 1) the facilities would be owned by the City, 2) the City would pay the utility debt of the County, 3) the City would provide water and wastewater services to the consolidated area, 4) utilities would operate on an enterprise fund, and most importantly, 5) the formation of the City/County Utility Commission.

Soon after its formation, the Commission had to deal with many major projects that soon became milestones for the organization. The first major project was the 201 Plan. This plan was in response to
EPA mandated legislation that required public utilities to better clean the wastewater being discharged into raw water sources. Unlike many other public utilities, the Commission had been studying this issue and was able to submit its 201 Plan in a timely fashion. Consequently, the City/County Utility Commission received a grant from the EPA which paid for 75% of the $70 million environmental improvements. These included sewer line and wastewater plant improvements, construction of new lines, construction of the Muddy Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant, and a regional laboratory and maintenance building at the Archie Elledge Plant.

Another milestone came in 1990 when the City/County Utility Commission assumed responsibility for the Solid Waste Disposal Management Program. A Citizen Task Force was formed and based on their recommendations, the City/County Utility Commission began to operate a comprehensive Waste Management System that included aggressive long-term plan for waste disposal and funded curbside recycling for the City of Winston-Salem as well as many other recycling/waste reduction programs.

Historically, the City/County Utility Commission has had the privilege of excellent leadership that takes their volunteer positions very seriously. In response, staff has acted with a willingness to serve the Commission conscientiously. The staff and Commission members have combined efforts to produce a successful organization that benefits the entire community. Many industrial customers such as R. J. Reynolds, Lee Jeans, Corn Products and Stroh Brewery have benefited from the sound management principals of the Utility Commission.

The Commission has governed the Utilities Department in a manner that has allowed the unit to grow. Consequently, the Department has plans for the future with many of the projects underway. In the past three decades, the Utility Commission has added one new wastewater treatment facility; the Lower Muddy Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant performed two major upgrades to the Archie Elledge Wastewater Treatment Plant, and has constructed a new preliminary treatment facility and influent pump station there. The Utility Commission has also added one new raw water supply intake on the Yadkin River and 25 Million Gallon per day water treatment facility, the Swann Water Treatment Plant, The list of other projects includes the refurbishment the R.W. Neilson Water Treatment Plant, and
completely replacing the RA Thomas Water Treatment Plant near downtown Winston-Salem. In addition to these major plant facilities, the Commission has provided for the long-term management of its wastewater treatment residuals by implementing a phased approach to biosolids management, culminating in the construction of a biosolids dryer facility in 2008. This facility will meet the systems biosolids disposal needs for the next 20 years.

Faced with aging infrastructure in the water distribution and wastewater collection piping systems, the Utility Commission began focusing on pipeline rehabilitation in 2004. Since then, over 25 million dollars has been invested in pipeline rehabilitation to insure the longevity of the systems for future generations. In 2016, the Utility Commission approved the implementation of the Collection System Improvement Program. The purpose of this program, currently entering into its fifth year, is to optimize the operations and maintenance of the Utilities wastewater collection system through operational improvements and the prioritization and delivery of capital improvement projects. The program is projected to last a total of seven years. The success of the program is evident, as in fiscal year 2019, the Utility reported its lowest number of sanitary sewer overflows (SSOs) to date.

The Solid Waste Disposal Program has performed long range master planning for Forsyth County and all eight municipalities within the county under the guidelines of the North Carolina Division of Environment and Natural Resources for 10 Year Solid Waste Management Plans. In performing its duties to provide long range planning and solid waste management, the Utility Commission has served its neighbors in a regional capacity. Beginning in 1999 it expanded the Hanes Mill Road Landfill providing an additional 30 years of landfill capacity for the local service area. In addition, the Commission has built and operated the Old Salisbury Road Construction and Demolition Landfill on the southern reaches of the service area and has acquired land to provide additional capacity on the northern side of the service area. The Overdale Road Yard Waste Facility opened in 1993 in response to Yard Waste being banned from the Landfill. In 2007, the Forum 52 Yard Waste Facility opened.
The City/County Utility Commission and City/County Utilities rebranded in 2019. The name of the department changed to Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utilities, thus changing the name of the Utility Commission to Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission.

The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission is an organization with the vision and leadership to serve the Winston-Salem and Forsyth County community well into the future. The Commission is committed to professional management of environmental, financial, and human resources.
II.

INTRODUCTION

“January 5, 1778-Br. Triebel and Strehle went today to the English settlement to cut logs suitable for water pipes”. (Neilson, 35) In December of the same year the Village of Salem installed 332 wooden rods of water pipes, costing over $2,000.00. The average citizen of Salem was expected to help with the upkeep of this system by paying 9 pence per 4 weeks, regardless of how much water they used. As the town grew, so did the demand on water, which resulted in the need for better pipes.

In the book, A Historical Account of the Water Supply Systems of Salem and Winston 1752 to 1913, these are numerous diary entries that illustrate the quality of pipes during that time. One entry reads, “May 31, 1791... President Washington visited out water works and gave his approval of them and the service it gives”. (Phillips, 7) Although the water system worked, there were problems. The major problem was the short ground life the wooden logs had, which resulted in leaks and the lack of water pressure or the delivery of water at all. By 1806, Br. Crist suggested that clay pipes should be used to replace the wooden ones. There is evidence that clay pipes were used but an extensive replacement program did not occur at that time. (Phillips, 8)

In 1828, a Committee was established to examine the water shortage and how water could be distributed more effectively. The committee’s report, “proposed to use the free spring at Br. Theodore Shulz water-works leading the water to his line and Br. Benzion’s bottom garden and there the water can be taken in a direct line to a point in front of the house of Theod. Shulz, the highest place in town, and can from there be distributed. Iron pipes to be used from the wheel to the cistern” (Note: a cistern is an artificial reservoir for storing liquids, especially water). (Phillips 9)

This brief look into the earliest form of public utilities management for the local community gives some insight into what officials of the City of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County faced in the 1970s when considering consolidation of the County’s and City’s Water System. Like the early citizens of Salem, City and County officials both wanted to serve their communities well in service and in cost, and so the seed of a consolidated system was sown in Forsyth County in the late 1960s.
III.

Murmurs of Consolidation

County and City leaders began talking about consolidation as an alternative to the two existing Public Water Systems. The need for consolidation was confirmed by an Engineering Firm in 1965, Piatt and Davis & Associates of Durham, who was hired to review the projected population growth in the area. The Engineering Firm concluded “that the nature of Forsyth County and its growth pattern are such that possibly another approach would be preferable to the present methods of providing services, and that all water and wastewater services be placed under a single authority”. (Piatt & Davis, 6) Piatt and Davis further recommended, “The authority would not be identified necessarily with the County or a Municipality, but could be a separate entity”. It was the Piatt and Davis report that generated initial discussions of the City/County Utility Commission.

From this recommendation, a Committee was jointly established by Fred D. Hauser, who was then Chairman of the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners, and the Mayor of Winston-Salem, M. C. Benton. Both the City and the County placed four individuals on the Committee. (Sparrow, 12-10-65) the ninth member was Kernersville Mayor Roger Swisher. The County appointees were G. S. Coltrane, G. G. Reynolds, County Manage Robert Hauser, Jr., and Purchasing Agent and General Director of the County James B. Nowell. The City appointed members included Aldermen Floyd S. Burge and C. C. Ross, City Manager John Gold, and Superintendent of City Water Stanford E. Harris, Jr. The Goals for this group were to assess the consolidation proposal, to examine what sort of governing “authority” would benefit Forsyth County and actually determine, if at this time, a merger was feasible. (Sparrow 12-10-65)

After six months of debate and discussion, City Manager John Gold made a controversial remark that “the County should build a Water System so that they have something to consolidate”. (Winston-Salem Journal 3-22-66) this remark proved to be a splinter in the City’s side for quite some time. The controversial remark was perhaps spoken in haste, but nonetheless had some validity. The County was undeveloped with sparse water lines. The goal for the County was to develop the water lines and then tap into the City’s system.
The talk of consolidating the City and County Water Systems stalled until late 1973. An article appeared in the *Winston-Salem Journal* on November 29, 1973 entitled, “Water/Sewer Study Starts Friday”. The article announced a new committee. Members to the committee were appointed as before, with fair representation from both the City of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. Appointed by the Winston-Salem Board of Aldermen were Director of Hanes Dye and Finishing Company, Joel A. Weston, Sr.; Vice President of Wachovia Mortgage Company, Sterling A. Spainhour; and the Manager of Westinghouse, Alan J. Melinger. The Forsyth County Commissioners appointed Director of Western Electric Company, H. J. Shultz; a Lumber Company Executive from Rural Hall, Burke E. Wilson; and Fred D. Hauser, a former Chairman of the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners. (Hore, 12-4-73) The final member of the group was George S. Coltrane of Kernersville. Fred Hauser was chosen to serve as the Chairman of the group because he had dealt with the consolidation talks in 1965. This group was faced with the subject of timing of consolidation, since by this time; there was no question that it would occur. (Hoar, 11-29-73)

Discussions regarding the details of the consolidation agreement bounced through various committees of both the City and County for several months. Negotiations on specifics took some time. Discussions of a consolidated water system came to a head at an abruptly called special meeting of the Forsyth County Commissioners and the Winston-Salem Board of Aldermen in April of 1976. The meeting was called to vote on a final agreement, designated to create a unified Public Water System. The Commissioners and the City Aldermen voted in separate sessions, with the agreement being passed in a 3-1 vote and 5-4 vote, respectively. With the close vote on the consolidation issue, it quickly became apparent that opposition to some critical sections of the agreement still existed for both elected officials and citizens alike. This lack of agreement came as a surprise to many because all involved had previously appeared satisfied with negotiations. One figure in particular, Alderman Richard N. Davis, was a vocal opponent. He argued that the terms of this agreement had been changed to the City’s disadvantage and the Aldermen had no control over what would be decided. He preferred an earlier proposal that gave the Board of Aldermen final approval over all actions of the appointed commission. (Hoar and Slater, 4-21-76)
Concerns were also expressed by a number of citizens present at the special meeting. Their concerns were of a slightly different interest. One issue expressed was that an appointed committee would not listen to the people or care about how issues affected the community. Others worried that the Board of Aldermen and the County Commissioners would not take their job of appointing outstanding community leaders to the consolidated commission seriously. Citizen Sue Drummond, also wife of County Commissioner David L. Drummond, was quoted by the Winston-Salem Journal at the County Commissioners meeting as saying, “The Board, including my husband, does not have a good record of appointing people to various citizen’s Boards and Commissions. Nearly all appointees are Democrats, most are men, and many are not qualified”. Mrs. Drummond went on to say that she has done some eavesdropping and has heard frantic last minute calls among the Commissioners trying to fill appointed positions. She asked, “Will the Utility Commission be any different?” (Hoar, 4-21-76)

In spite of the controversy, in the spring of 1976, the City of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County followed in the footsteps of other North Carolina Cities, such as Greensboro and Charlotte, and created a consolidated City/County Water and Wastewater System. The consolidation was officially effective July 1, 1976 (Hoar, 4-21-76).
IV.

CONSOLIDATION AGREEMENT

The agreement to consolidate the public utility facilities of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County contained several important provisions. Among them were: 1) both parties agreed that all facilities would be owned by the City, 2) the City agreed to pay the utility debt of the County, 3) the City agreed to provide water and sewage services to the consolidated area, and 4) all water and sewage operations would be financed through a separate utility fund. A fifth, and perhaps the most significant aspect to the merge, was the formation of the City/County Utility Commission (CCUC). Mr. William Hobbs, a former City/County Utility Commission Member, explained the main goal of Commission Members was to oversee the successful merge of water services, and make a unified system which was efficient in operation and cost. (Hobbs, Summer 94)

The first 11 members appointed were: Thomas H. Davis, Flake F. Steele, Jr., William D. Hobbs, William H. J. Schultz, Willie E. Grissom, Leonard E. Warner, Jack L. Covington, Martha Lowrance, G. S. “Sol” Coltrane, Joe L. Pinnix, and John F. Watlington, Jr., who served as Chairperson until his retirement in 1986. (City/County Utility Commission Minutes, 37) The City Aldermen and County Commissioners each appointed five members, with the eleventh member being appointed by the Mayor and the County Commission Chairperson. This member would serve as the City/County Utility Chairperson.

Along with the formal provisions, there was also an understanding that the City/County Utility Commission would be run as a private enterprise. Therefore, the people placed on the Commission would represent no special interest groups, and all operations were to be financed by revenue generated from the services provided, not tax money.
V.
MILESTONES

Soon after its formation, the Utility Commission embarked upon the most significant infrastructure capital building project to date. In 1972, federal legislation was passed that required public utilities to better clean the wastewater being discharged into rivers, streams or other raw water sources. The Federal Government offered grant money administered by the Environmental Protection Agency to assist with this point source clean up. To qualify for the grant money, each public utility had to conduct an extensive study to determine specific problems, methods to remedy them and a timetable for completion. This document became known as a 201 Plan. Fortunately, Utilities staff had already completed this research and was all but ready to process. However, at that time, the Utility Commission had insufficient funds to pay for all the projects needed. Because many other North Carolina public utilities had not prepared their 201 Plans in time, the City/County Utilities Division was able to submit its plan and receive $70 million in EPA grant money. The EPA grant money paid for 75% of the designated environmental improvements, leaving the State and City/County Utility Commission to pay the remaining 12.5% respectively. The $70 million improvements were spent on the following projects:

- $7.2 million Connected Town of Kernersville’s Sanitary Sewer System
  Archie Elledge Wastewater Treatment Plant
- $5.5 million Major improvements at the Archie Elledge Wastewater Treatment Plant
- $2.0 million Construction of Regional Laboratory and Maintenance Building at Elledge to serve Wastewater Treatment Plants
- $2.3 million Inspections and repairs of existing sewer lines to reduce infiltration and inflow.
- $3.0 million Construction of new sewer lines.
- $50.0 million Construction of the Muddy Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant. (Hoar, 2-24-82)
As the era of EPA funding closed out on the 1980s other funding sources were identified by the Utility Commission. In 1988, the Utility Commission began using revenue bonds to fund most of its Capital Improvement needs. Many other projects that have been constructed by the Utility Commission and funded by Revenue Bonds issued by the City of Winston-Salem include:

- $30.7 million  The 1991 odor abatement project at the Elledge Wastewater Treatment Plant
- $15.3 million  The 1996 upgrade of the Lower Muddy Creek Wastewater Plant
- $3.0 million  The 1998 Phase 1 modernization of the R W Neilson Plant
- $84.4 million  The 2002 25 MGD North West Water Treatment Plant Dam and Intake (renamed to the Swann Water Treatment Plant in 2010)
- $6.5 million  The 2003 Biosolids dewatering facility
- $30.8 million  The 2006 Biosolids Dryer Facility
- $65.3 million  The 2008 replacement of the Thomas Water Treatment Plant
- $60.5 million  The 2008 relocation and upgrade of the Archie Elledge Wastewater Treatment Plant Headworks
- $124 million  The 2015 South Fork Critical Improvements Program including the Muddy Creek Consolidated Influent Pumping Station and several capacity related projects to the wastewater collection system
- $121.9 million  The 2021 Neilson Water Treatment Plant Modernization Project

In the late 1980s, a Citizen Task Force was appointed to weigh the pros and cons of consolidating the City’s and County’s Solid Waste Disposal Operations into a Single Operation. The 1990 report assessed present and future waste disposal issues and recommended a Waste Management Plan.

The primary outcomes of the Task Force efforts were:

- The Technical Sub-Committee made two recommendations; to institute solid waste recycling efforts, and to work on consumer waste reduction.
- The Finance Sub-Committee, keeping increased recycling efforts in mind, advised the compensation for public recycling efforts.
• The Public Awareness Sub-Committee suggested that a Public Relations Firm be hired to communicate the City’s recycling efforts to the public.
• The Organizational Sub-Committee made the key recommendation that the “County-Wide Solid Waste Management Authority should be put under the auspices for the City/County Utility Commission” (Report of the City/County Task Force on Solid Waste Disposal p.25).

The Utilities Department considered the recommendations of the Task Force and instituted a comprehensive Waste Management Program. This Program included funding a City-Wide Curbside Recycling Program and long-term planning for Solid Waste Disposal in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. The enterprise operation for water and wastewater proved such a success that it became the impetus for the addition of the Solid Waste Disposal Program as an enterprise fund in 1988 to the City/County Utility Commission’s responsibility.
VI.

LEGACY OF THE UTILITY COMMISSION

The most significant facet to the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission’s success is the quality of membership, leadership and support the group has been able to acquire. The early Commission Members achieved the goals for consolidation and efficient operation of the water and wastewater systems. The success of this organization can be attributed to the quality of the people that served on the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission. When the Commission was first formed, the City and County both saw the benefits of appointing people who have venerable personalities and who could work in a team effort. The Senior Staff Member to the Utility Commission, Assistant City Manager/Public Works, Mr. P. W. Swann, emphasized the importance of obtaining community leaders to serve on the Utility Commission; “They give instant credibility that brings honor to the Commission” (Swann, 94), This frame of mind continues to draw people to serve on the Commission. No person has turned down the opportunity to work on the Utility Commission since its formation.

When looking at the achievements of the Utility Commission, it is important to highlight the leadership of Mr. John F. Watlington. He is the former City/County Utility Commission Chairperson who served for ten years and made a bold impact during the formative years of the organization. Mr. P. W. Swann, Assistant City Manager/Public Works, recalled the impact Mr. Watlington had on people and situations, “Mr. Watlington made it clear that the City/County Utility Commission would be run according to the original provisions and as a private enterprise, minus political interference”. This leadership also allowed a highly effective support staff to evolve. Dr. Manson Meads, who succeeded Mr. Watlington as Commission Chairperson, emphasized the significant support the Commission received from Assistant City Manager/Public Works, Mr. P. W. Swann and Utilities Superintendent, Mr. Thomas Griffin. The Staff quickly discovered how seriously the City/County Utility Commission members took their volunteer responsibilities, and responded with a willingness to serve the Commission conscientiously. The delicate balance of members and supporting staff has been vital to the success of the City/County Commission. (Meads, Summer 94)
VII.
FINANCIAL SUCCESSES

No review of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth Utility Commission would be complete without examination of its financial success. Because the Utilities Department was to be operated as an enterprise fund, shrewd business people needed to serve on the Commission (See Graphs 1, 2 and 3).

Graph 1

Graph 2
One should not neglect the financial gains the management of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission brought to the Piedmont. The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County area, with its abundant water and wastewater resources, is held in high regards throughout the State of North Carolina as an example of prudent, long-range planning coupled with strong financial principles.
VIII.

FUTURE PLANS

The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission has long had the reputation as an efficient operation with a long-range vision. Future plans for the water and wastewater system include maintaining a competitive water rate in the state, sustaining the goal of providing the best possible service to its more than 370,000 customers and continued investment in the critical infrastructure of water and sewer lines and treatment plant facilities.

The solid waste disposal program has sufficient capacity to meet the community’s solid waste management needs well into the future. The program must find ways to meet the challenges of funding its core responsibilities and continuing to provide excellent management oversight into the valuable waste reduction and recycling programs needed to ensure sustainability of the region’s waste management assets.

IX.

CONCLUSION

The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission has become synonymous with success. The respect the members and supporting staff have earned is based on professionalism and hard work. The best way to summarize the mission of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission is found in a speech given by Dr. Manson Meads, who served as Commission Chairperson from 1986-1990. He writes:

“First, that, as the utilities system is self-financing, it must be operated as a business with commensurate authority and public accountability, but freed as much as possible from political winds; Second, that it would serve the needs of all of its customers (municipal, corporate, business and individuals) in an equitable and sensitive manner; Third, that it would maintain sound professional management that would seek to give high quality service at the lowest possible cost; Fourth, that it would be proactive in planning and action in anticipation of future needs.” (Meads, Summer 94)
WINSTON-SALEM/FORSYTH COUNTY UTILITY COMMISSION MEMBERS – FORMER & PRESENT

Flake F. Steele, Jr. (1976-1982)
Donald R. Stewart (2003-2008 and 2016-2021)
Paschal “Pat” W. Swann (1997-2007)
Raymond D. Thomas (1998-2010)
Randall S. Tuttle (2008-2022)

Leonard E. Warner (1976-1986)
Claudette Weston (1986-1998)
A. Tab Williams (1987-1997)
Charles Wilson (2020-Present)
L. C. Woolard, Sr. (1998)
Allan Younger (2018-2023)

CHAIRS – FORMER & PRESENT

Manson Meads, M. D. (1986-1990)
Christopher J. Chapman (1990-1998)
J. Hugh Wright (1998-2007)
Paschal “Pat” W. Swann (2007-2009)
Randall S. Tuttle (2017-2022)
L. Wesley Curtis, Jr. (2022-Present)
XI.

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