

**SANFORD** — When drought hit a decade ago, communities throughout the state struggled to conserve water. Nearby Raleigh, for example, imposed some of the more stringent rules.

But it wasn't only the immediate crisis that felt so ominous. With new people flowing into the Triangle every day, many worried that water shortages could become more severe over the years.

Water rationing was everywhere, it seemed. Except in Sanford.

As the Triangle was drying out, Sanford was flush with water. The only problem was convincing locals. Larry Thomas, who was the City of Sanford's public works director at the time, recalls the panic.

"We tried to get it across to the public that we had plenty of water," says Thomas, who retired in 2008, the year after the water crisis hit its depth. "A lot of towns would be rationing water and we were saying, 'We've got plenty — and, it's being recycled.'"

How could Sanford have so much water?

Thomas credits community visionaries, who made tough decisions decades ago that laid the foundation for success.

In the case of water, it was building a new, state-of-the-art processing plant way out in the country. The current system pulls water out of the Cape Fear River, from a location where it's most plentiful, and can move 12 million gallons per day through a filtration facility that was built with room to expand.

Another advanced, expandable facility built about the same time treats wastewater and returns it to the Deep River roughly 11 miles upstream from the filtration plant, preserving water in a sort of endless recycling loop.

Thomas isn't sure whether that loop was planned or a stroke of good fortune. In any case, it means that Sanford has plenty of water and, as recent events demonstrate, is good at sharing it for the benefit of the region.

Sanford, needing only 4.5 million gallons per day, already treats the wastewater of Goldston, a small Chatham County town. Last December, the Golden LEAF Foundation awarded the City of Sanford a \$4 million grant to extend sewer nine miles to the Moncure Megasite. And in early March, Sanford contracted with Pittsboro to treat up to 2 million gallons of wastewater, beginning May 2018.

"What happened is the city fathers were progressive," Thomas says. "They were thinking about what was good for Sanford and expanded, so they would have the capacity to meet whatever might come."

### ***Deja Vu All Over Again***

It may seem like a no-brainer now, but back when the water debate began in the early 1960s, the new plant was a controversial idea that faced plenty of opposition. And the same could be said for Raleigh Executive Jetport, Lee County's regional airport serving the entire Research Triangle Region.

When the 700-acre jetport opened in 2000, it quickly became a local gem. About 150 corporate and private planes are currently based on the field — along with a North Carolina Forest Service forest fighting hub, several aviation-related companies and one of the nation's oldest flying clubs offering flight instruction and plane rentals for about 440 members.

Bob Heuts understands the jetport's impact better than anyone. Hired as Lee County's economic development director just before the facility opened and now serving as jetport director, Heuts notes that Raleigh Exec contributes \$32 million annually to the local economy, a figure that should only grow, with new hangars added recently for private planes and an expansion of the corporate area starting this spring.

But when it was first proposed to replace a much smaller airport in town, opposition grew quickly. To borrow a phrase from legendary baseball player Yogi Berra, it was *deja vu* all over again.

"There were so many people against that airport," recalls Sanford Mayor Chet Mann. "But when you look at the tax base it created and the opportunities it presented, it's been one of the greatest things that's ever happened in Lee County.

"And nobody disagrees with that today."

### ***Infrastructure Isn't Sexy***

Since those early water debates, Sanford has been out in front of the curve on developing infrastructure — that system of transportation, utilities and public safety that helps define any community's economic fortune and quality of life.

The most recent example is Streetscape, a major project that transformed Sanford's dated downtown into a walkable, attractive urban center. The \$6.5 million initiative reshaped walkways, buried power lines and created the kind of commercial environment that draws visitors and investment.

Mann says infrastructure investments like Streetscape pay off — with every dollar invested in infrastructure returning \$5 to \$6 in private investment. Still, even with successes like the water system and jetport, Streetscape wasn't an easy sell.

Why? Infrastructure isn't all that sexy. Wastewater treatment. New traffic lights and curbing. Airplane hangars. That doesn't always sound very glamorous. It may be critical for a city's long-

term health to install water and sewer lines into a new area ripe for development. But there's no guarantee it will pay off right away.

Lee County leaders seem undeterred. Thomas, Heuts and Mann agree that Sanford remains an attractive location for business and residents now because local leaders have long understood how important a solid infrastructure is for any community to thrive.

"We've got to stop waiting for the world to come to us," is how Mann describes the need to prepare the city for success. "We've got to put something together and take it to the world."