

Neighbors Cry Foul Over EcoComplex

By Ragan Robinson

Catawba County's EcoComplex might get nationwide and statewide attention, but its neighbors aren't impressed.

They say the large commercial trucks hauling trash to the landfill and wood to the EcoComplex are tearing up the blacktop around their houses and leaving garbage strewn in yards, fields and roadsides.

This week, more than 100 of the state's county commissioners and other county officials toured the EcoComplex as part of the N.C. Association of County Commissioners' conference, held in Hickory.

Greg Wyant, whose family's homeplace is on Hickory-Lincolnton Highway near the Blackburn Landfill and surrounding EcoComplex, had signs nearby to greet them.

"Caution, County BS Zone," said one.

"More Traffic + Trash," read another.

The largest sign takes on Barry Edwards, director of utilities and engineering for Catawba County and often the public face of the EcoComplex. He was among those county officials interviewed for a story about the project on CNN's "Your Money."

"Eco-Plex bad for community, good for Barry Edwards EGO," reads a tall piece of wood.

The road in front of Wyant's family property is rough, with dark patches over spots where the asphalt has crumbled. Wyant talks over the sound of tractor-trailers and garbage trucks pounding over the bad spots.

He's unhappy about the pieces of wood lying on the roadside and the trash he says covers yards along Hickory-Lincolnton Highway and Rocky Ford Road, where the EcoComplex sits.

Thurman McCaslin, who lives on Rocky Ford Road, closer to the EcoComplex, feels the same as Wyant.

"It's just ridiculous," he said. Hickory-Lincolnton Highway is a nightmare. It's just beat to pieces."

He said paper and wood often cover his lawn. He wonders how the county can charge him and other area residents for throwing away other people's trash dropped onto their land by garbage haulers.

Edwards said the landfill requires anyone who dumps trash there to have their trash covered. If trucks don't have a tarp, drivers are required to buy one there, Edwards said.

Sgt. Michael Rogers of the N.C. Highway Patrol said it is up to law enforcement officers to enforce laws requiring garbage trucks to have their loads covered or otherwise secured.

Wyant and other residents still harbor hard feelings about a sewer line that serves the EcoComplex.

Part of the line is in the ground across from Wyant's land. Catawba County condemned and took the land for the sewer line under eminent domain laws after property owners

wouldn't allow the line to go in on their property. The final decision of the land's value-the amount the county must pay the landowners-remains in court, Edwards said.

Wyant and other property owners say they were the first told they wouldn't be able to tap onto the line. In court, they say, they were told residents could.

Edwards said sewer line is there to help preserve the road and save the cost of trucking wastewater out of the EcoComplex. He added that anyone could connect to that line, but, for some, it would have been expensive.

Wyant, McCaslin and other area property owners also complain they were told the Blackburn Landfill wouldn't be on the Rocky Ford Road spot for more than 15 years when it opened 30 years ago.

Edwards said that charge came up when commissioners more recently began considering the best spot for the landfill. He said the promise is nowhere in the county's records.