

## **A Brief History of Water Quality in the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County**

An Englishman named John Lawson was the earliest explorer to venture into Mecklenburg County. In a journal entry in 1700, Lawson noted that what is now Mecklenburg County was "abounding in many and delightful rivulets." In the two centuries that followed, grain mills and saw mills sprang up along the banks of Mecklenburg County's 3,000 miles of creeks—churning out flour and lumber. Fisheries and ferries dotted the Catawba River. Local creeks and streams were primarily used for drinking and bathing.

As the population grew, methods for sewage disposal did not keep pace. By the 1900's, raw sewage was routinely dumped into streams. By the 1950's, some industries were piping contaminated factory wastewater directly into them. In 1970, a study found that fish had disappeared from Little Sugar Creek and many Charlotte-Mecklenburg creeks and streams and popular swimming holes were full of bacteria. A newspaper headline about the study results read "The Creek Is Simply a Sewer."

In response to public concerns about polluted waterways, the Mecklenburg County Department of Environmental Protection was created in 1970. City and County funds were used to begin identifying and eliminating sources of water pollution. Two years later, the federal Clean Water Act was adopted.

In 1993, the City of Charlotte obtained a federal National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Phase I Stormwater Permit. Phase I permits are designed for cities with more than 100,000 residents. As part of the Permit, The City of Charlotte's Storm Water Services was formed. Using newly-instituted storm water fees, the City immediately began improving drainage infrastructure and eliminating sources of stormwater pollution.

Mecklenburg County began a fee-funded Storm Water Services program in 1994 that included services to Cornelius, Davidson, Huntersville, Matthews, Mint Hill and Pineville. In 2005, Mecklenburg County and the six Towns received a Phase II Permit. The goal of the partnership was to develop an effective, countywide effort to reduce stormwater pollution.

Starting in 1995, the City of Charlotte, the six Towns and Mecklenburg County adopted ordinances to protect water quality and stormwater. In 1999, Charlotte and Mecklenburg County also adopted the Surface Water Improvement & Management or "SWIM" Ordinance. The six Towns adopted similar stream buffer ordinances over the following two years.

Today, fish have returned to Little Sugar Creek and other local streams and improvements have been dramatic since the mid-1900s. Unfortunately, bacteria and sediment levels in some local streams still remains higher than state and federal standards allow. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Water Quality Program will continue to evolve and improve to meet these standards.