

# Charlotte rethinks septic system fees

## One leader says he gets complaints every week about them

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Charlotte County residents may see some financial relief from -- and the possible end of -- an alternative septic system that has long been the source of complaints. County officials are working with the state to try to amend laws governing the fees and maintenance requirements for septic systems called aerobic treatment units, or ATUs. County Commissioner Bob Starr said he receives weekly complaints about ATU fees from residents. The number of complaints spiked after a change to the state septic code, requiring payment two years in advance, took effect this year.

Owners now must pay \$400 for a two-year maintenance contract with a septic contractor, plus \$300 to the county Health Department for a two-year operating permit, said Herman Velasco, environmental health administrator. The contract includes two inspections per year, and the Health Department conducts an annual inspection.

The county agreed to require ATUs on smaller undeveloped lots as part of a 1998 legal settlement with the state over a sewer dispute. But Starr wants the county to be allowed to change its codes so ATUs are no longer required.

About 2,800 homeowners have the units, he said. "They don't work properly, they're very expensive and maintenance is a problem," he said. Starr said residents should pay fees yearly. He said he wants Charlotte County Utilities to be authorized to inspect the ATUs at less cost.

The units are regulated by the state, and because of the 1998 settlement, the county must go through the state Department of Community Affairs to drop the requirement. Starr said state Rep. Ken Roberson, R-Port Charlotte, and state Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, have offered their help in getting rule changes through the Legislature.

But the changes can't come soon enough for Port Charlotte resident Mike Wilson, who was stunned when a \$700 bill arrived without warning in December. He hasn't paid it yet. "I just don't see why we have to pay two years in advance," Wilson said. "Comcast doesn't bill me for 24 months and threaten to disconnect my cable if I don't pay." He said the operating permit fee is too high and should be paid by the contractor. In Lee County, the permit costs \$150 for two years; in Sarasota County, it costs \$100 for two years.

In the 1990s, the state urged the county to convert to central sewers, claiming that the septic system was polluting waterways. The county devised a publicly unpopular \$600 million sewer plan. The county dropped the plan, and the state sued. ATUs were seen as an alternative that created less pollution.

But Velasco said ATUs have long been considered a nuisance. They need to be inspected, serviced and pumped frequently because of mechanical and electrical components that pump oxygen into the waste water. In addition, they cost between \$6,500 and \$8,500, one Englewood supplier said.