

# County lowers Aerobic Treatment Unit fees

By **JOSH SALMAN** STAFF WRITER

Charlotte County commissioners voted 4-1 Tuesday to lower mandated inspection fees for all area Aerobic Treatment Units.

The commission office has been getting inundated with complaints from area residents who can't afford to pay the biennial inspections required on their ATUs. Commissioners wanted to provide relief, and reduce the fees to standards more in line with Charlotte's neighboring counties.

Commissioners hope the next step is eliminating the system all together.

"It's a nightmare," Commission Chairman Bob Starr said. "We're charging more than anyone else, and there's something wrong with that picture. They don't work, and they never should have been mandated in this county."

ATUs are waste disposal systems similar to the common septic tank. They're used on properties not suitable for standard septic because the lot's either too small or lacks central potable water.

The county requires ATUs or similar systems on all lots less than 10,000 square feet, according to the Charlotte County Health Department.

Charlotte has 2,466 active ATUs the health department inspects twice per year at \$200 a pop. Tuesday's approved changes will chop that fee in half.

Commissioners said some residents even were receiving property liens and threats of legal action for their failure to pay.

"This is one of those situations I find appalling," Commissioner Tricia Duffy said. "I'm happy we could reduce these fees. Now we need to get rid of (ATUs) all together."

ATUs are an oxygen heavy disposal system with several complex pumps that allow bacteria to flourish, forcing them to be serviced more routinely than traditional septic systems.

Commissioner Adam Cummings, who cast the lone dissenting vote, said the move will reduce revenues below expenses and force the health department to subsidize inspections through cuts in its clinic services.

Since 2007, the number of county residents using ATUs has grown 15 percent, according to health department records.

"We try to have as many fee-based services as possible so those in need pay for it instead [of the entire county]," health department Administrator Steven Mitnick said. "Now we will have to use ad valorem dollars to offset costs."

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