

# County halts sewer project

## Several commissioners cite need for info, grants

By GREG MARTIN STAFF WRITER

After residents voiced outrage at recent community meetings over the \$13,000-per-household cost for a proposed sewer system for Port Charlotte, Charlotte County commissioners delivered a message of their own Tuesday: The sewer project is nixed for at least this year.

However, the commission also directed its staff to gather more information on the need for sewers and seek state and federal grants to reduce the costs.

The discussion came after Commissioner Robert Skidmore made a motion to derail the project. He said he wanted to assure residents in the Phase 1 area, between Charlotte Harbor and State Road 776, they won't have to gear up for hearings to approve the project in July or face a bill for the sewer system in November.

Ignoring the will of the residents is akin to saying, "We're smarter than you," Skidmore said. "That's not what I took an oath of office to do."

"Science is theories with a little bit of fact," he added. "My goal is to stop the train."

The motion passed 4-1 with Commissioner Adam Cummings dissenting.

Chairman Robert Starr, while supporting the motion, also urged residents to work with their commissioners to lobby state and federal lawmakers for grant funding.

Starr also warned that the county backed off on its mandatory septic system inspection program because it was pursuing a central sewer system.

Now, however, the inspections should resume and residents found with faulty septic systems will have to repair them, he said.

"It may cost a significant amount of money to raise these drain fields," he warned.

Herman Velasco, director of Charlotte County Environmental Health, said Charlotte County has known for decades that septic systems are polluting swales, canals and Charlotte Harbor.

He cited a study on non-point pollution sources completed in 2003 in which the health department staff worked with 230 households in Port Charlotte to monitor their septic systems.

The staffers unexpectedly discovered high numbers of septic systems were crumbling, leaking or clogged, he said.

The health department in 2008 also investigated a flurry of complaints about standing water in some areas. The health staffers discovered high levels of fecal coliform and enterococci bacteria in those pools, he said.

The bacteria is found in the stomachs and intestines of humans and other mammals. Severe environmental exposure, however, can cause ear infections, dysentery, typhoid fever, bacterial gastroenteritis and diarrhea.

The study found standing water at North Spring Lake Boulevard and Tarpon Boulevard with coliform levels as high as 16,800 colonies of fecal bacteria per milliliter. By comparison, local beaches are closed whenever coliform colonies rise above 400, Velasco said.

The county's septic system management program requires inspections every five years for a \$115 fee. If inspectors find the septic tanks have rotted out, they have to be replaced.

Some systems fail merely because a "distribution box" has become clogged, Velasco said. Contractors typically charge \$600 to install that component, he said. A new drain field can cost \$6,000 and a new tank \$2,000 or more, he said.

To date, in a 10,000-household area of Port Charlotte, health staffers have inspected 5,400 septic systems and cited 920 in need of repairs.

Now that the public's attention has been drawn to the issue, the county should press on with a solution, Velasco said, in an interview after the meeting.

"I think charging everyone \$13,000 is insane," said Commissioner Tricia Duffy said. She suggested \$10,000 would be an acceptable price.

"None of this is new," said Cummings, referring to the outcry from residents.

He pointed out, as the economy revives, the cost of constructing the sewer system will rise. But, the incomes of many residents won't rise because they are on fixed incomes.

"There is not going to be a good time (to pay for a sewer system)," he said.

He also warned, if the county fails to stop the contamination, the state may impose draconian limits to future growth.

E-mail: gmartin@ sun-herald.com