

Charlotte sewer plan not over yet

By **JOSH SALMAN - STAFF WRITER**

Residents living in the first area targeted for Charlotte's phased sewer expansion plan dodged the fee on this year's annual assessment, but the program is far from dead.

Charlotte commissioners agreed last month to stall a plan that would force residents to pay thousands of dollars to replace their current septic systems. But the county made a deal with the state to get high-priority areas sewered, and eventually, Charlotte will have to make good on its promise. The first phase of the program includes about 18,000 homes located west of U.S. 41 between Charlotte Harbor and State Road 776 in Port Charlotte, also referred to as area one.

After county officials announced the proposal, hundreds of area residents voiced concerns at community meetings, protested the move and fought every detail, leading to its eventual postponement. "We got quite a reaction," County Administrator Roger Baltz said. "Anytime you talk about central sewer and the costs, those can be quite difficult conversations to have. But installation of central sewer in Charlotte County is not dead."

As part of a 2007 permit to remove portions of the Manchester Lock, the county agreed to begin looking into a phased sewer expansion plan to meet state mandates and reduce pollution flowing into area waterways.

Charlotte's soil contains high levels of sulfate, which eats at septic tanks from the inside out, causing them to fail. Many of the county's septic tanks also were installed before the mid-1980s.

The issue caught the state's attention about a decade ago, and the Florida Department of Environment Protection ordered Charlotte to correct it. Charlotte Harbor and Lemon Bay since have been declared impaired waterways. "The county made a commitment to move forward with the sewer program, and we have to keep working on it," Baltz said. "We're obligated to." Earlier this year, the county completed a preliminary assessment of phase one. The cheapest option called for a hybrid gravity sewer system.

The project carried a \$410 million price tag, leaving each homeowner responsible for paying \$13,689, including installation and connection fees. The expense was to be assessed interest-free over 20 years, creating a projected \$57 monthly bill. The county proposed moving forward with the plan, but residents were outraged by the mandated costs and project's timing, given the area's double-digit unemployment.

"The bottom line is this is a bill they don't have right now," Baltz said. "The conversations became about the timing of this with the economic hardships, but I don't know that the timing will ever be good." Charlotte will have to report back to the FDEP later this year on the program's progress, and Baltz said it's unclear how the department will react to the delays. But he said Charlotte's not giving up.

The county now is seeking federal earmarks to ease the financial burden posed to residents.

The Florida Keys were successful in garnering \$35 million in federal grants to implement a wide-scale sewer-expansion project, which local officials said was needed to help protect the area's coral reefs.

Charlotte hopes to mirror that success by showing the similar importance of Charlotte Harbor.

County administration also has explored the idea of breaking the project into smaller phases, making it more appealing to residents while still chipping away at the underlying problem.

As a stopgap, the health department will continue to monitor its septic management program. "Central sewer is the ultimate thing we will all need, there's no doubt about it," said Herman Velasco, Charlotte County Environmental Health administrator. "But until we can afford it, the (managed) septic program will slow things down and reduce the levels of pollution. We have a lot of things working for the environment." Recent health department tests showed escalated levels of fecal matter in the waters surrounding area one.

Still, some commissioners said there's no direct correlation linking the pollution to malfunctioning septic tanks rather than runoff from commercial mining in East County. Commission Chairman Bob Starr wrote letters to the health department and FDEP requesting proof septic systems are to blame. He's still not buying the explanations. "I told them I needed empirical data, and they haven't proved anything yet," Starr said. "If, in fact, the septic tanks are polluting the harbor, I also told them we would need some help because it just costs too much."

Now, commissioners hope county staff will continue their public outreach efforts and find a price point the majority of residents would accept. If the commission ultimately approves a sewer expansion, it would take up to a decade to complete. "Not surprisingly, there was a lot of opposition, but I'm not confident we can just walk away from this indefinitely," said Commissioner Adam Cummings, who cast the lone dissenting vote in last month's decision. "We may be able to negotiate some wiggle room, but doing nothing isn't an option."

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