

# Commissioners drop ATU mandate

By JOSH SALMAN, STAFF WRITER

Charlotte County commissioners voted unanimously Tuesday to drop a decade-old ordinance mandating residents and builders install Aerobic Treatment Units on many homes to dispose of their waste.

As part of Charlotte's managed septic program, the county agreed to use ATUs over baseline septic systems on all lots less than 10,000 square feet. The smaller, more complex ATUs were first thought to work better and serve as a stopgap until the county could sewer its heavily populated areas.

Over the years, complaints began pouring in from residents who were upset with the system's required biannual inspections and costly repairs. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection also has released research showing ATUs are not as environmentally friendly as once believed.

"This is a very positive move," Commissioner Robert Skidmore said. "It was an untested science that artificially drove up repair costs and created a monopoly. There isn't one positive thing you can say about ATUs."

ATUs contain mechanical and electrical components that pump and circulate air into the wastewater, which helps spread the oxygen-craving bacteria sought to break down the sludge. But because the systems are smaller and more complex, they need to be pumped more frequently, require inspections twice a year, and malfunction more often, according to the Charlotte County Health Department.

Each of these stipulations ultimately drives up the costs for homeowners. Routine maintenance and electricity on a unit can cost up to \$1,000 per year. Charlotte currently has about 2,500 ATUs.

"Getting rid of this ordinance is one of the best ideas we have ever had," Commissioner Tricia Duffy said. "I'm glad we're finally doing it."

While officials agree dropping the ATU mandate is a step in the right direction, they said the number of traditional septic tanks malfunctioning is still the greater issue.

More than 45,000 county residents use some form of septic to dispose of their waste, with some original systems nearing 40 years old. The typical lifespan on a septic tank in Southwest Florida is 10 to 15 years, CCHD Environmental Health Director Herman Velasco said.

Each of these aging and malfunctioning septic systems contributes to growing pollution levels in Charlotte Harbor and Lemon Bay, he said.

"The ultimate answer, which will put my department out of business, is central sewer," Velasco said. "But you mention sewers here, and the residents just get so angry. They don't realize our biggest driver is quality of life and water, and septic systems are just constantly polluting it."

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