

# Charlotte OKs sewer pilot

By JOSH SALMAN - STAFF WRITER

MURDOCK — Charlotte County commissioners unanimously agreed Tuesday to fund the start-up costs for a pilot study that will test the feasibility of installing central sewers in Port Charlotte as an alternative to the state's new septic replacement mandate.

The county will do the engineering, design and bid process needed to install central sewers on more than 2,000 homes in a Port Charlotte neighborhood commonly referred to as Spring Lakes. The program was designed to compare the cost differences between installing sewers or specialized new septic tanks — the requirement of a state law that takes effect in January.

Once the study is complete, commissioners will decide if they want to move forward with sewer and potentially expand the program to include 18,000 Port Charlotte homes in the first area targeted for Charlotte's long-term phased sewer expansion plan.

"We have been talking for a long time about what's the true cost of sewer," County Administrator Ray Sandrock said. "This puts us in a position to be shovelready and explore all funding options. The chances of septic failure are quite high, and this is an area that has to be addressed sooner rather than later."

Florida lawmakers passed a bill this year that will require the drain fields of all septic tanks built before 1983 to be elevated at least 12 inches above the tank. Most area septic systems built during that time have drain fields that are elevated only six inches.

That means thousands of residents in Port Charlotte would be left with the choice of either shelling out up to \$14,000 for a specialized septic replacement or thousands of dollars for central sewers, which residents may be forced to eventually do anyway. The county's study hopes to find the more sensible options, Sandrock said.

Unlike new septic tanks, sewers would be assessed by the county interest-free over 20 years.

"I think this is a good way to do it because now we're letting homeowners decide," Environmental Health Administrator Herman Velasco said. "Any day now we're going to get something from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection that says you need to sewer this area, and we want an annual report on your progress."

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

Earlier this year, county officials announced a proposal to begin phase one — 18,000 homes located west of U.S. 41 between Charlotte Harbor and State Road 776 in Port Charlotte. At several community meetings, residents protested the move, and commissioners eventually pulled the plug.

The highest-priority area targeted in the Manchester agreement was Spring Lake, where 81 percent of the septic tanks were built before 1983 and would likely need to be replaced under the new state law. Commissioners said that makes the neighborhood an ideal test site for the entire county.

"We discussed a plan to sewer this area and it wasn't exactly met with happiness, but the homes will be required to put in a new septic tank anyway," Commissioner Tricia Duffy said. "People need to understand they can pay to replace their septic system all at once or finance sewer with the county. This will be less expensive for the homeowner in the long run."

The project announced earlier this year carried a \$410 million price tag, leaving each homeowner responsible for paying \$13,689, or \$57 per month assessed over 20 years.

Commissioners Tuesday said the successes of the new plan will depend largely on how much they can reduce that burden.

"The reason the torches and pitchforks came out last time is we didn't include the stakeholders from the beginning," Commission Chairman Bob Starr said. "I think this is a reasonable project, but we need to make it affordable. We're going to have to eventually do this anyway."

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