

A year of achievement, rebuilding and progress for utilities

By Dave Watson

2024 has already begun as an exciting year for Charlotte County Utilities. In January, we officially received our first American Public Works Association Accreditation. Achieving accreditation was four years in the making. Our journey began in a small conference room at the Utilities Administration building at the East Port Environmental Campus. It ended in small group sessions in the lunchroom at our Eastport Water Reclamation Facility Operations building. In between, we worked through a national pandemic and a major hurricane, which severely damaged our administration building.

The accreditation process was arduous, requiring our staff to review every procedure and standard operating protocol throughout the utility. Many were updated, some were removed for being outdated and many new procedures were created to meet the requirements of the accreditation process. The process brought together our staff from across all divisions and included staff from other departments as well.

The accreditation process confirms that the utility is performing at a nationally recognized level. It affirms we are working to recognized standards, providing water, wastewater and reclaimed water services to our community. I am incredibly proud of my team for all their hard work and effort.

Hurricane Ian presented challenges to the utility that had not been seen in many years. Since we were forced to relocate from our offices on Harborview Road, we are expecting to move into our new temporary home sometime this month. We continue to make repairs at our wastewater lift stations and plants damaged by the storm, hoping to complete those by the end of 2024.

Over the past several years, Charlotte County has experienced more growth than at any point in the utility's history. Our staff is growing and working to meet the needs of our residents and the building industry. We face challenges every day between staffing shortages, material delivery delays and construction scheduling in attempting to meet the needs of our customers.

With that said, growth is both challenging and exciting. As the county grows, new projects are required. In February, we broke ground on the East Port Water Reclamation Facility expansion project. This \$106 million project will expand the facility and increase the treatment capacity from six million gallons per day to nine million gallons per day. This project is expected to be completed in the fall of 2026 and will serve the mid-county area for wastewater treatment, including advanced wastewater treatment.

The Burnt Store Water Reclamation Facility expansion is currently in the bidding process, with bids due at the end of this month. Construction of the project will take two and a half years. The Burnt Store facility will expand from 0.5 million gallons per day to 2.5 million gallons per day and serve the South County area. Additionally, the Westport and Rotonda Water Reclamation

Facilities are currently in design and planning for future expansions to serve the needs of West County as we continue to grow.

Charlotte County Utilities is working with the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Authority to install new water transmission and distribution lines along Hillsborough Boulevard, which will provide additional water to the Mid- and West County areas. This project is expected to take approximately two years to complete and cost more than \$58 million.

Septic-to-sewer projects continue to move forward, with the Ackerman project under construction now and continuing for another three years. The Lakeview-Midway and Cape Haze projects are working through fieldwork and engineering design, with the expectation of construction starting sometime in 2025.

Charlotte County Utilities' dedicated staff continues to work every day to ensure our residents are provided with safe, dependable drinking water and wastewater services for the enrichment of our community.

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