

County lays groundwork for sewer master plan

By GARY ROBERTS

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MURDOCK — During the first of more than 30 meetings dedicated to establishing the Charlotte County sewer master plan, commissioners and consultants sat down at Tuesday's workshop to begin the collaborative task of developing a 20-year implementation and funding program.

While sharing a determination that the septic-to-sewer conversion will be both efficient and affordable, they held no illusions it would come easy.

"This is a long-term, heavy lift," Commission Chairman Bill Truex said.

However, they said the effort would be worth it to protect Charlotte Harbor from failing septic tanks that release excess nutrients into the environment. The question remains, though, what will it be worth to property owners, in dollars and cents?

That answer likely will come at the Nov. 15 workshop, when assessments methods and other funding options will be explored.

"This is an expensive project," said Tony Hairston, senior manager with Raftelis Financial Consultants.

Several factors could determine the ultimate cost to home and business owners, he said, such as project scope, type of sewer, density, and availability of grants and other sources of revenue. These alternative revenue sources could include infrastructure fees so part-time residents help pay for road restoration, sales tax money as is used in Sarasota County for sewer improvements, surcharges and increased utility rates.

Hairston said a reasonable cost for affected property owners would be about \$60 a month for 20 years. Still, some form of subsidy would be required to cover the cost of sewer installation, which generally falls within a range of \$14,000 to \$20,000 per unit, he said.

State grants typically are awarded to shovel-ready projects and those directly linked to improving water quality. Charlotte County scores well on both counts.

In addition, Charlotte is starting to design wastewater expansion projects for the Ackerman-Countryman, El Jobean and north U.S. 41 areas, demonstrating the county's commitment and investment before seeking state assistance. Effective lobbying also tends to sway lawmakers.

"Water quality is going to be extremely important to the Legislature this year," Commissioner Ken Doherty said.

"We're competing with everybody."

Senior consultant Tom Friedrich of Jones Edmunds, who is heading up the sewer master plan, enjoys boating and fishing, and is well acquainted with Charlotte County resources.

“It’s a great place to be, and protect,” he said. “This is so important and one of the things our team is focused on — the need for this project. We know that when you have septic tanks in areas by water tables, it does cause problems.”

Acknowledging that transparency and public education will help push the project forward, consultants will host an open house to further explain the what, how and why of a wastewater collection and treatment system.

Commissioner Stephen R. Deutsch said some citizens still resist the science behind sewers.

“We’ve got to get real here. We’re way beyond deciding if we need sewers,” Deutsch said. “This board made that decision 15 to 20 years ago. We’ve made our case. We have to do it.”

The Mid-County sewer master plan is slated for completion in February 2017, followed by the West County plan in June and South County in August.

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