

Sewer master plan prompts questions

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MURDOCK — Charlotte County is continuing its slow, deliberate unveiling of the sewer master plan, outlining areas targeted for septic-to-sewer conversions as well as projected costs.

On Tuesday, consultant Jones Edmunds provided a 15-year priority plan that ranked neighborhoods ripe for wastewater expansion based on several criteria, including proximity to surface waters, age of septic systems and the amount of nitrogen being released.

Another major factor is housing density, which makes the sewer project efficient and affordable to both residents and the county.

“There are a lot of numbers involved with this,” said Chris Baggett, chief engineer for Jones Edmunds.

Using this formula, the areas north and south of the pilot project in East and West Spring Lake jump to the front of the line, which during the first five years of implementation focuses on Mid-County. This initial phase calls for the sewer conversion of 4,000 lots at a total actual cost of \$85 million, or \$21,000 per lot. In this area, the average age of septic tanks is estimated at 26 to 40 years old, officials said.

The second five-year interval would concentrate on 5,476 properties north of Midway Boulevard, east of U.S. 41, along with three sections in East Englewood and one in South County. The price tag for this phase comes to \$23,000 per ERC (equivalent residential connection), or \$124.3 million total.

“All of these are considered higher- priority projects,” Baggett said.

The third five-year period would tackle neighborhoods spread throughout Mid-County and West County, in less dense areas where action is deemed less urgent. Here, the cost to convert properties would total \$140 million and cover 5,094 lots, or an actual construction cost of \$27,000 per ERC.

These consultant recommendations, which have yet to be approved by the County Commission, call for about 1,000 lots to be connected to sewer annually over the course of the 15-year plan.

These figures do not include vacant lots because the consultant proposes they not be assessed. If the vacant lots are hooked up to the central sewer system and charged at a later date, the per-lot cost in each of the five-year intervals drops to about \$14,000-\$15,000.

However, for commissioners to keep individual property owners’ cost down to around \$15,000 from the start, as is their stated intent, they need to subsidize the project with other funding sources. These are among the details that still need to be worked out.

According to one possible funding model, 1 percent sales tax revenue could be used for sewers. But this would require a separate sales tax referendum that wouldn’t be on the ballot until 2020.

At this point, Commissioner Ken Doherty is hesitant to commit sales tax dollars to sewers, saying there are other needs in the county for this money, such as for public safety and to implement the parks and recreation master plan.

Another big question mark is the method of imposing assessments on affected properties. With commissioners opposed to establishing more municipal service benefit units, that leaves a direct assessment on the property tax or utility bill as likely options.

Commissioner Chris Constance said the argument could be made that a countywide sales tax dedicated to sewers would serve everyone by improving water quality that, in turn, would support tourism and provide economic benefit.

In fact, he said sewers would provide a direct boost to local development.

“We can drive expansion in the county,” Constance said. County Utilities Director Gary Hubbard agreed that sewers add value to existing as well as proposed developments.

“We have one builder that’s working with us who said, ‘Bring me sewer and I’ll develop this area.’ We’re in that process right now,” Hubbard said.

But before the full rewards of sewer expansion can be achieved, Charlotte must determine the project’s exact cost and how to generate the necessary funding. The consultant’s report moves the county closer to that starting point.

“As we find efficiencies, we may make modifications to this plan, but I think this is a good start,” Truex said.

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