

# Work begins on sewer master plan, costs

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Staff Writer 10/16/16

MURDOCK — Facing rising costs and limited revenues, the Charlotte County Commission is exploring how to finance the Mid-County sewer expansion program in a way that is fair and equitable to property owners.

The preliminary sewer master plan, which eventually will identify and recommend projects that are affordable for residences and businesses, will be introduced at Tuesday's county workshop session. The all-important assessment method used to determine individual user costs will be discussed at another workshop next month.

But it will take until February 2017 to complete the Mid-County sewer master plan. In the meantime, a lot of work remains to be done.

The problem with the current funding model surfaced at a seven-hour public hearing that drew 300 people in July, when residents with large, combined lots were outraged over being charged tens of thousands of dollars for sewer service to a single home or business. While county officials said 95 percent of the residences were not affected by exorbitant rates, these outliers caused commissioners to rethink their funding method.

"What we saw were very extreme examples," said Travis Mortimer "The reality is that this is a heavy task before us."

The county is starting to design the next wave of septic-to-sewer conversions, affecting the Ackerman-Countryman, El Jobean and north U.S. 41 areas. However, the implementation of assessments to pay for these projects has been delayed as a result of the protest heard at the marathon public hearing.

Simply put, the sewer assessment was supposed to be funded through a newly established municipal service benefit unit, based on the total cost of the project divided by the number of units receiving the benefit. But when multiple vacant lots are under one ownership, the price tag can be staggering because the funding method figures in the potential development of these lots.

The actual cost to establish new sewer service is estimated to be around \$14,000 per lot, or ERU (equivalent residential unit). But commissioners want to keep the cost share for affected property owners as reasonable as possible.

In the pilot project in East and West Spring Lake, the bill paid by property owners was capped at \$10,000 per lot. Commissioners have since learned that higher infrastructure costs will make it difficult to maintain this threshold.

"Fundamentally, we need to consider resetting the model," Commissioner Ken Doherty said. "The key word is going to be affordability."

At a previous workshop, commissioners debated the various funding alternatives, which include subsidizing sewer costs with countywide tax increases in the utility rate, millage rate, property MSBU or the local option sales tax.

Another concern is how to fund the hardship program for low-income property owners. In the pilot project, grant money covered the \$111,000 paid out over three years. For the septic rebate program, which reimbursed property owners who invested in new septic systems just prior to the sewer conversion, the Charlotte County Utility Department reached into its reserves to pay the \$600,000 tab. That is no longer an option, said director Gary Hubbard.

“Quite frankly, we don’t have the reserves,” Hubbard said.

It was pointed out, though, that with greater public awareness of the sewer program, there will be less need for septic rebates. Communication with residents is key.

The county health department could help with this effort, commissioners said, by not requiring property owners to replace their septic tanks when sewers will soon be coming to their neighborhood.

“We really have to stop the madness,” Commissioner Chris Constance said. “They need to be informed.”

Helping to develop the sewer master plan, and achieving a fair assessment method in the process, is senior consultant Tom Friedrich of Jones Edmunds, who said his goal is to find solutions.

“Our job is to help you guys get there,” Friedrich said.

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