

OUR VIEW

Necessity of sewers made clear

OUR POSITION: *Latest study undeniable: Septics pollute Charlotte Harbor.*

Real science is difficult, complicated stuff. A full understanding of natural sciences takes years of study and a dedication to the classical scientific method of careful observation and measurement. It's all about data, and the data invariably tells the story.

Charlotte County commissioners heard a presentation last Tuesday from Brian Lapointe, a Ph.D. scientist with the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute at Florida Atlantic University. With four others, Lapointe issued a study with a weighty title: "Charlotte County Water Quality Assessment. Phase 1: Data Analysis and Recommendations for Long-Term Monitoring."

Long title. But the conclusion is simple and clear: Septic tanks are polluting Charlotte Harbor.

We've heard it before. But in recent years we've also heard a continual stream from those questioning the scientific rationale for septic replacement. The doubters are just plain wrong.

Septic tanks may work fine in other environments: the rural West, Northeast or Midwest, places with different soil types and larger housing lots. But not here in sandy, coastal Southwest Florida. Certainly not here in a community with so many homes on small lots, like Charlotte County.

According to county officials, central sewer in Charlotte now treats 6 million gallons of effluent a day. Another 4 million gallons a day flows into the ground via 28,000 individual septic tanks. That is the equivalent of one ton of nitrogen entering the environment every day. It goes into the ground. And eventually but surely it makes it into the waterways.

The report from Lapointe, et al., is available online on the Charlotte County website, www.charlottecountyfl.gov. To read it, navigate the left side of the page to BCC Agendas and find the Dec. 13 commission meeting. Click on that and find the Item R, Number 1, of the Regular Agenda: Water Quality Assessment. Open the PDF files of two attachments. (You can also watch the taped presentation of the meeting on the county website.)

We recommend that anyone who questions the science give this a careful reading (or viewing). The report runs 58 pages. It has a ton of technical data.

But this, from the executive summary:

"Multiple lines of evidence suggest that septic systems are a primary source of nutrient loading from the Port Charlotte study area into Charlotte Harbor. Analysis of the historical data and the reconnaissance sampling both indicated that septic systems are contributing significantly to nutrient and bacterial pollution of surface waters and groundwaters."

And then:

"This research indicates that inadequately treated septic waste is a major source of nitrogen to this system, and that improved wastewater treatment, which currently removes an average of 90 percent of sewage nitrogen, would reduce nutrient loads from septic systems and help mitigate environmental impacts associated with current and future population growth."

Open and shut. In fact, the five county commissioners who listened to Tuesday's presentation agreed the case was closed. They delayed follow-up testing until a point after sewer service was operating in the Spring Lake area of Port Charlotte. That will allow old and new data to be compared.

Charlotte County has been moving steadily toward extending sewer service in El Jobean and Port Charlotte. Going forward, the question is how to pay for it. "Why" just isn't an issue.