

OUR VIEW Environmental stewardship fuels economy

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OUR POSITION: *With one sewer project nearing completion, Charlotte County establishes responsible path for more.*

The conservation movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries begat the modern environmental movement. It was a Progressive idea with various ideals, one of them that proper human stewardship of the environment is not only goodly (or godly) for its own sake but critical to the social and economic well-being of the community at large.

Its most notable proponent was the Republican President Theodore Roosevelt. But the policies and goals were not restricted by party affiliation. More than a half-century after TR occupied the White House and hiked the Yosemite wilderness, a Democratic Congress and Republican President Richard Nixon established laws that would restore, enhance and protect landscapes, water and air quality.

Our high quality of life — priceless, as we look back now — was the result of controversial policies and political struggles on the national, state and local levels. Success took vision and compromise. It also demanded sacrifice. These public policies cost money: tax money and private money. What we've received as an environmental legacy came with a price: It involved what economists call "pain."

With that lofty backdrop, we also recognize the mundane but critical value of public sewage treatment — the sewers beneath our own home turf. Most importantly, the decisions by Charlotte County officials who worked to enact a careful, sensible plan to convert thousands of individual septic systems to cleaner, healthier public sewers.

Recently, the County Commission approved a master plan that will determine how new sewers will be installed in critical areas. According to a story by *Sun* staff writer Gary Roberts, the plan establishes priorities for wastewater treatment in 14 Mid-County neighborhoods with 4,000 connections. The long-range master plan calls for three five-year sub-plans covering 14,500 lots.

It is expensive. It involves economic pain — to the public at large and to the individuals affected. The overall price tag for the initial high-priority area is more than \$100 million. Costs for subsequent projects are projected to be \$350 million.

Charlotte County officials are looking for grants and subsidies to cover a portion of costs. It would borrow from the State Revolving Fund at a low interest rate. Some General Fund contributions are likely in the years ahead.

But key — certainly to individual property owners — is the cost of hookup. Connections would cost \$11,500. Homeowners will be able to pay the total upfront or finance the investment over 20 years at a projected \$44 a month.

That will be a hardship for some. But we do believe homeowners will see a corresponding benefit in property values with access to public water and sewer service.

We are confident of the environmental benefits to the public. As County Administrator Ray Sandroock wrote in a column in the *Sun* last week, harmful nitrogen waste from septic systems in the 14 neighborhoods is expected to drop by 114,000 pounds per year. That means cleaner water and a healthier Charlotte Harbor for all. With 27,000 septic tanks in Charlotte County, this is both an environmental and economic imperative. Consider it a legacy for future generations.

Kudos to this commission for recognizing the importance. Kudos for moving forward in the East and Spring Lake projects in the face of fierce opposition. Kudos for developing a long-range plan and communicating it to the public, and for considering multiple options to support funding.

These are not easy decisions for local elected officials. These decisions are made in the face of strong, personal, face-to-face opposition from well-intentioned but angry individuals who will be forced to sacrifice and stretch their budgets, occasionally beyond modest means.

Reaching this point entailed a strong belief in the necessity of environmental stewardship for the public good, and it took political courage to insist on a plan that is both responsible to the public and sensitive to individual constituents.

It's an important step that deserves recognition.