

## **Rights of way play a critical role in roads and drainage**

By John Elias

As we close out 2021, our Public Work's team continues to serve the citizens of Charlotte County. Charlotte County is a unique county in Florida. Our population is close to 200,000, yet we maintain one of the larger road networks in the state. This comes as a surprise to so many folks I speak with that we have approximately 2,100 miles of roads we are responsible for. These roads are located across the 858 square miles that make up Charlotte County. This road network makes us the eighth largest road network in Florida and contains more roads than Hawaii or Rhode Island's Department of Transportation. This is the equivalent of a road going from Port Charlotte to Nova Scotia.

The primary infrastructure we are responsible for is anything within our roads or the area on either side of the road typically referred to as the right of way. This includes roads, bridges, sidewalks, and most other items in or adjacent to the right of way.

These responsibilities include paving, mowing, brush cutting, drainage, garbage collection, mosquito control, a drawbridge and lock operation and serving as the authority on any permits that result in someone needing to occupy or cross our right of way. Many residents understand the right of way, but some who have moved from other parts of the country do not. In Charlotte County, we have typical profiles for most of the county to include varying distances from the center of the road to 15 to 25 feet or more in some locations on each side of the road.

This right of way is critical to ensure the aforementioned facilities can reside on land the county has some element of control of. For example, if you live in Port Charlotte and have a county road in front of your house, you are required to mow or maintain the part of your lawn in the right of way. If the lot is vacant, we are tasked with mowing and maintaining this area. This area is regulated to ensure any facilities placed in the right of way are safe for the traveling public. The right of way is also important as a clear zone or recovery area in the event a car travels off of the roadway.

Another critical role the right of way plays is to serve as a location for our drainage facilities. The majority of Charlotte County was designed with an open swale concept. This is a stark contrast to more urban areas that have curb and gutter systems to convey water. Our system conveys the water in an open swale and helps to improve water quality as nutrients can be removed or reduced naturally as the water makes its way to our canals and major outfalls. We get thousands of requests for drainage from citizens who say "there is water in my swale". Some are surprised to learn that is exactly where it should be. In curb and gutter systems this water is usually housed in pipes no one sees.

With our proximity to sea level and the annual rainfall we get in our amazing subtropical environment, drainage can be an issue. Those attributes, coupled with the minimal elevation change to convey water, means we operate in extremely tight margins for swale elevations. So much so that even a mower or car putting a rut in our swales can impeded efficient water flow. With the population growth we are experiencing, the construction can often hinder water flow in swales and block drainage. It is paramount we all work together to not block these drainage systems. This means we need to partner with homeowners, utility providers, and any contractor working in our right of way to ensure they remain clean and unobstructed. If you see anything

that might block drainage or be a safety hazard in the right of way, please reach out to the Public Works Department so we can address it.

*Readers may reach Public Works Director John Elias at [John.Elias@CharlotteCountyFL.gov](mailto:John.Elias@CharlotteCountyFL.gov).*