

Everyone plays a role in keeping rights of way clear

By John Elias

Public Works is responsible for many functions of our local government. We are comprised of four divisions: Engineering, Solid Waste, Mosquito and Aquatic Weed Control, and Maintenance and Operations. We are also responsible for a drawbridge on our barrier island and a lock in South Gulf Cove. We even manage several cemeteries and provide oversight of mining operations throughout Charlotte County.

Most people reading this have already moved here and have come to love our little piece of paradise. With monthly home permits exceeding records and still topping more than 300 new homes a month, people continue to move here in large numbers. We take pride that others love our area as much as we do, but this can present some challenges to our team at Public Works.

Living in Charlotte County is vastly different than the areas from which most of us moved. If you're from a heavily populated urban area you might be accustomed to government services to include drainage, sidewalk maintenance and public transit. If you are from a rural area those government services are typically more aligned with services we provide here which is right-of-way maintenance, mowing and tree trimming.

The right of way exists where most streets are located and includes portions of most residents' front yard adjacent to the road. This right of way is set aside to serve several functions.

Primarily, it is public land that allows a place for a street and or sidewalk to be located. In addition to those purposes, it also serves as a corridor for public utilities, including power, cable, sewer, water, and storm drain infrastructure to be placed. It also serves to provide a safe "clear zone" adjacent to the roadway. For vehicles that are forced to leave the road, this is a relatively safe area where you can regain control of your vehicle and safely re-enter the road. This clear zone requirement can vary based on speed limit and other factors.

With the amount of precipitation we receive annually and the open swale drainage systems throughout Charlotte County, it is crucial these areas remain clear. Public Works mows and cuts brush back and also conducts drainage maintenance activities. Southwest Florida is a low-lying area with very little elevation change. Something as minuscule as a mower inadvertently putting a rut in the flow line can negatively impact drainage. We can all work together to mitigate these issues by doing our best to keep the right of way free of debris and mowed in front of our houses.

Public Works partners closely with the building industry to regulate what activities occur in the right of way during the construction of a house. As mentioned earlier, the extraordinary growth we are experiencing is resulting in numerous construction sites staging material and equipment, and damaging the right of way. It might seem insignificant to have one 80-foot area being blocked but it potentially adversely impacts drainage for a block or two.

In most cases, the damage and blockages are not intentional but still create drainage issues and limited sight visibility in neighborhoods. Public Works has limited staff that is responsible for inspecting and correcting these issues. We rely heavily on the professionalism of the contractors, subcontractors and suppliers to ensure their worksites meet the regulations. We also ask citizens to report these issues when they see them. We can all do our part to ensure

the rights of way are safe and allow the drainage to work effectively. If you see an issue in the right of way, please report it to Public Works at 941-575-3600.

Readers may reach Public Works Director John Elias at John.Elias@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.