

Sewer plan aims to protect Charlotte Harbor

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For decades, the beauty of Charlotte Harbor and its natural resources have drawn people to its shores. It has been recognized as one of the best places in the United States to fish, golf, live and retire. In many respects, the harbor represents our livelihood and offers a strong sense of place for our citizens and families.

It's no secret that the increasing population has had an environmental impact on Charlotte Harbor over time. Since water is recycled through the natural water cycle and we are continuously reusing this water, directly or indirectly, the Utilities Department is taking a leadership role in making water quality improvements. We're taking our mission — to provide reliable drinking water, reclaimed water and wastewater service for the enrichment of the community — to the next level.

Utilities has several ongoing efforts that reflect our county commissioners' strategic goals for infrastructure, quality of life and water resources that include water quality monitoring, septic-to-sewer conversion projects and the Charlotte County Sewer Master Plan.

The county has partnered with Jones Edmunds to develop the plan, a 15-year road map to build sewer systems that support the health of the Charlotte Harbor estuary in an affordable, sustainable, efficient and reliable manner. The draft plan identified priority areas for conversion to sewer, but will be flexible enough to fluctuate as critical priorities, issues and new development emerges.

We'll be hosting two public information meetings to share the draft CCSMP and receive citizen feedback. The first meeting is scheduled for 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., Nov. 8, at the Tringali Park Community Center, and the second from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., Dec. 13, at the Charlotte County Event and Conference Center. Visit [www.](http://www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov)

CharlotteCountyFL.gov and click on "Utilities" under Popular Links, then "Sewer Master Plan" to learn more about the meetings, and to fill out an online survey that is planned to launch in mid-October.

On Oct. 3, the commission meeting will also be devoted to Utilities Department updates, including the master plan and next steps for septic-to-sewer conversion projects in El Jobean East and the Ackerman/Countryman area. Conversion projects will continue to be an essential investment in sustaining our community's infrastructure and to improving water quality in our watershed.

The county is working to secure project funding from legislative allocations, grants and low-interest state loans so customers connecting to the sewer system will have an affordable rate they can pay up front or finance monthly. In 2017, customers connecting to the sewer system through the line extension program pay \$11,201, which includes the cost of septic tank abandonment and physical connection. The



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septic-to-sewer conversion plan's proposed financial model outlines a new methodology to charge \$11,201 for connections at developed lots.

Last year, Utilities partnered with the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute at Florida Atlantic University on the first phase of a research project that showed how septic systems are contributing to nutrient and bacterial pollution in the Charlotte Harbor estuary.

Currently, we are working with Western Michigan University's hydrogeology department to measure the velocity of nutrients traveling through groundwater. In addition, Utilities continues pre and post-monitoring to show nutrient-loading reductions in project areas while fulfilling grant requirements and compliance. We welcome these opportunities to collaborate with scientists and educators in water quality monitoring related to the conversion process.

The Utilities Department is proud to lead Charlotte County's integrated water supply and stewardship strategy, whether it is for our beaches, waterways, health or hydration.

We know it takes large financial investments and that our businesses, citizens and visitors experience construction inconveniences along the way. However, we are very grateful for the partners who share our water stewardship goals and for the citizens who support these essential infrastructure improvements.

We look forward to your engagement in upcoming meetings and encourage you to "like" Charlotte County Utilities on Facebook, and visit "Utilities" under Popular Links at www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov.