

**East and West Spring Lake Sewer Project – The July 1 Special Public Hearing**  
**By Ray Sandrock, County Administrator**

On July 1 the Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) held a special Public Hearing regarding the proposed East & West Spring Lake Wastewater MSBU pilot program. I organized a presentation to the Board regarding the central sewer program—an important decision critical to the health and safety related to their identified key focus area: water quality. I kicked off the presentation by recapping the BCC’s corporate vision for the County and the identification of water resources and quality of life as part of the strategic focus areas.

The presentation continued with Todd Rebel, P.E., Banks Engineering Team (Team), who evaluated and oversaw analysis of the pilot program alternatives and public outreach for the program. Mr. Rebel shared the wastewater alternatives reviewed by the Team, the project’s driving factors including the Manchester Lock Agreement, and the documented water quality impairments of the waterways in the Spring Lake area and Charlotte Harbor, pointing out that 75 percent of the area’s septic systems are over 30 years old and need to be replaced.

As part of their outreach efforts, the Team held three public meetings and assembled a stakeholder committee earlier this year. The committee included representatives from ten community groups and 14 randomly-selected residents from the Spring Lake area. Three committee meetings were held, where all available information was shared with participants, and the committee then created a report to the BCC with a recommendation to move forward with the pilot program. The report included seven stipulations for the program, of which five were able to be included in the resolution: financial hardship, a rebate program, cash pay-out option, alternative funding options, and short-term septic repair program. Of the two not included, the financial deferment stipulation is unable to work within an MSBU process and the master wastewater expansion stipulation cannot occur until the BCC gives direction to proceed beyond the pilot program. TJ Thornberry, Chamber of Commerce representative on the stakeholder committee, spoke in praise of both the detailed information presented and the process used to conduct committee’s informational meetings.

As derived by the Team, the cost to the property owner for the sewer project amounted to only \$7,626.37 per typical occupied residential lot and \$4,375.37 for each vacant lot. For owners using the MSBU assessment method for payment to spread the cost over 20 years, the amount is approximately \$499.94 per year for occupied lots and \$307.59 for vacant lots, with totals of \$9,998.69 and \$6,151.70 respectively.

Danny Nelson, P.E., of Tetra Tech and part of the Team, presented a summary of the water quality report they submitted to the County, which included septic tank regulations and a summary of the findings from sampling data. The findings showed high concentrations of nitrogen, phosphorus and fecal coliform in the groundwater within East & West Spring Lake. Combining this information with area studies by other members of the scientific community over the past 15 years with similar findings arrived at the following conclusion: Onsite Septic Treatment & Disposal Systems (OSTDS) are directly linked to the decreased water quality within the East & West Spring Lake area. Central sewer was recommended as the optimal wastewater treatment system, eliminating further potential pollution and helping to diminish the impairment of Charlotte Harbor. This recommendation was made based on: the existence of unsuitable soils within Spring Lake for OSTDS; a seasonal high water table which does not provide required regulatory separation from drainfields for proper treatment and disposal of domestic waste; a high residential density in Spring Lake; the close proximity to canals and Charlotte County Ordinance 3-7-56 which prohibits OSTDS installation within 150 feet of a tidal water body; the limited treatment capability of an OSTDS; and water quality sampling test results.

Lisa Beever, PhD, AICP, and Director of Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program, presented a report on the water quality in Port Charlotte. Using the Charlotte Harbor Water Atlas program, Dr. Beever verified that the waterways in central Port Charlotte (southern end of Sunrise Waterway south to Port Charlotte Beach, the Tidal Peace, and Charlotte Harbor Proper) were determined to be contaminated with fecal coliform. These water bodies have been sampled for up to 14 years—the number of samples with high hits of fecal coliform has increased over the past five years. Due to these results and the age of the septic systems, she believed a central sewer program would measurably improve the water quality of the waterways in the Spring Lake area.

Capt. Paul Gagliano, P.E., MSCE, US Public Health Service Engineer Officer for EPA, and Florida Watershed Coordinator, spoke to the BCC next. Drawing from his experiences in designing military OSTDS and monitoring systems on Native American reservations, he pointed out that while EPA supports the use of OSTDS in rural areas, the systems do not work well in coastal areas. He stated that the EPA has found the general life expectancy of the typical OSTDS to be about 11 years with 10 to 20 percent failing in any given year, and that central sewer was a much better fit for the Spring Lake area due to the unsuitable soils, high water table and close proximity to waterways.

Karl Henry, REHP, MBA, Environmental Administrator for the State Department of Health (DOH) gave a presentation on the status of septic systems in the Spring Lake area, which is part of the DOH-administered Managed Septic Program in Charlotte County. DOH has responsibility to make

sure OSTDSs are appropriately pumped out and maintained in a functional condition. A review of their records indicates that 1130 households (16 percent) have not complied with the program and 283 of those are within the Spring Lake area. Repairs have been made to numerous systems, but many systems have started to experience failure and are not in compliance with Code.

Karen Bickford, Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) coordinator for Lee County Natural Resources, spoke on septic system effects on water quality. Lee County found that safe septic system use in Florida coastal areas was difficult due to unsuitable soils and to the inability to achieve safe setbacks to water source wells and water bodies with high population density. Studies show a substantial increase in reef and water clarity degradation since the 1980s. In addition, high quantities of nutrients and human enteric virus were found in water sampling data as a result of septic influence, and tests revealed wastewater traveled from the toilet to a surface water test point 167 meters from OSTDS within 11 hours. All of these results establish a cause to retrofit septic system neighborhoods to central sewer.

The presentation wrapped up with an overview of Charlotte County Utilities' (CCU) financial condition by Henry Thomas, Financial Consultant of Public Resources Management Group (PRMG). Mr. Thomas noted that CCU's financial management ranked them a high quality Aa3 bond rating recently, and a ranking of "strong" by the American Water Works Peer Review Team. PRMG found CCU's utility rates to be very competitive with neighboring utilities and are predicted to become even more competitive as other utilities increase their rates and CCU has no planned water or wastewater rate increases in the near future. Currently, CCU is projected to meet debt service coverage and operation and maintenance reserve requirements for the next five years, further lending to the consultant's position that CCU's financial condition is healthy and expected to remain so for years to come.

This presentation provided a multi-faceted overview to the Board of all the agencies, specialists, and environmental authorities that have been consulted and have provided large amounts of data from sampling and research. I'd like to extend a special thank you to all the experts for their participation. Some of them traveled considerable distances, at their own expense. The final report to the commission from the stakeholders committee, as well as other information including maps, FAQs and meeting summaries, can be found on our website. Visit [www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov](http://www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov) and click Sewer Expansion Projects in the Hot Topics list on the left.