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CCU adapting to future community needs

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Kesner is the interim director of Charlotte County Utilities.

Charlotte County Utilities was formed in 1991, when the county acquired the utility from General Development Corp. A mission statement was developed, which included a promise to operate a public utility system that was environmentally responsible.

This pledge to our customers has never been taken lightly, even though it requires longterm planning and a steadfast commitment to overcome some challenges.

Knowing the importance of Charlotte Harbor and the Peace River to sustaining and enhancing the quality of life in our community, the utility has gained the County Commission's approval to proceed with capital improvement upgrades of all of the wastewater facilities in our system, to exceed the local, state and national regulatory standards governing sewer and wastewater facilities.

By upgrading all wastewater facilities to be capable of producing an effluent discharged and used for high quality irrigation water, we can recharge the aquifers that lie in Charlotte County and preserve the delicate balance of our ecology.

After many years of planning, hard work and some cooperative funding from the Southwest Florida Water Management District, we are proud to announce that there are no longer "sewer plants" in our system. They have all been transformed into water reclamation facilities producing a non-potable effluent that meets secondary drinking water standards, thus protecting our citizens and the environment.

Our East Port facility has also been treating and disposing of septic tank and grease waste for the past few years, in cooperation with septic haulers and the Health Department. We invested in the equipment necessary to dewater the waste, which then gets transported to the county landfill for mixing with green yard waste and other biological materials, to be converted into compost. The compost is then used as daily cover at the landfill, saving them hundreds of thousands of dollars by not having to purchase fill dirt for cover.

The utility also saves hundreds of thousands of dollars by not having to haul the dewatered sludge to Okeechobee, the only landfill in the area that accepts this waste. This joint project between the landfill and CCU saves both of our customers a lot of money and provides environmental benefits that will last for many years.

Because being environmentally responsible also means properly maintaining the infrastructure already in place, we implemented a preventative maintenance program to inhibit stormwater from flowing into our wastewater collection system and overloading the capacity of our pipes and treatment plant, instead of soaking into the ground naturally.

This same maintenance program also inhibits wastewater from infiltrating out to the ground through cracks or leaks in the pipe, thus polluting the waterways. Simply by placing a special camera into our wastewater collection system line to visually check the pipes for any signs of leakage, we can get all the information we need to correct the problem. Any damaged pipes are then designated for a process called relining.

By inserting a flexible material that becomes firm when heat is applied to it, we now gain a product that is stronger than the original pipe and resistant to inflow and infiltration. This process also allows us to make repairs to our system without disturbing the roadways.

Future capital projects we have identified to help Charlotte County be environmentally "green" include:

- * Continued expansion of the reclaimed water transmission system, including interconnection all of the water reclamation facilities, to allow delivery of reclaimed water to areas of highest customer demands in the county, regardless of source.

- * Development of a means to store reclaimed water, to make it available during periods of highest customer demands during dry seasons.

- Development of plans for centralized sewer to help reduce the impacts that failed septic tanks have on our environment.

Maintaining our system at optimal levels has been accomplished with the blending of manpower, equipment and technology together to find results that meet our customers' needs, while preserving the precious resources we all enjoy. At CCU, we will continue our commitment and look toward technology and efficiencies to ensure that we have a system that we can be proud of today and into the future.