

Charlotte County update for 3/2/16

Planning the water system of the future

By Gary Hubbard, Charlotte County Utilities Director

The importance of having a safe source of potable water to rely on just isn't something most Americans think about, it's something we just expect. You might think about it if you open up your front door and see a geyser of water, or you see or hear water gurgling at your water meter. Definitely the residents of Flint, Mich., are thinking about their water sources and ways to improve the supply.

The men and women serving at the Utilities Department, though, do think about our water supply constantly. Even at home, during holidays, 24/7, 365 days a year. Your water supply is always being monitored. It's not just our job, it is our passion. We are stewards of our local environment and strive to provide exceptional services to the community.

In order for us to continue to do what we love to do, we must plan for the future. This means we must consider our current assets and where we plan to be in the next 20 years and beyond. We wouldn't be serving the public if we didn't plan for the inevitable, as our piping infrastructure has a specific lifespan. This is not just a Charlotte County area concern, it is a national concern.

"Our estimates are that this is a trillion-dollar program," David LaFrance, CEO of the American Water Works Association, said about the need for nationwide water infrastructure investments. "About half of that trillion dollars will be to replace existing infrastructure. The other half will be putting into the ground new infrastructure to serve population growth and areas that currently aren't receiving water."

Just how serious of an issue are we facing? Charlotte County has 1,427 miles of water main pipes. We average 480 breaks per year, or about 40 per month. The number of age-related breaks is approximately 300 per year. How does that compare to other cities? San Francisco has 1,200 miles of water mains and averages 100 breaks per year. Their system is 106 years old. Minneapolis, Minn., has 1,000 miles of water mains and averages 50 breaks per year in a system that is more than 80 years old.

What has caused these water main failures in our community? Our water distribution division keeps track of the types of breaks they are repairing. The top factors include aging pipes, our corrosive coastal environment and poor installation techniques. Remember, the Utilities Department purchased the majority of our infrastructure from private utilities. Those utilities were controlled by developers solely interested in selling property, not establishing a quality utility system.

The Utilities Department is aware of the need to balance repairing existing systems versus complete replacement of infrastructure, as well as the need to plan for future growth and expansion. When multiple repairs continue to disrupt water and sewer service, it is time to consider replacing that area of the system. Systematic planned replacement of our assets will result in less disruption to our customers. We look forward to the future and presenting our plans during upcoming County Commission workshops and meetings. We welcome your input and your comments. You can call the Utilities Department at 941.764.4507.

Gary Hubbard is the director of the Charlotte County Utilities Department. Readers may reach him at gary.hubbard@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.