

East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program

Stakeholders Committee

**Final Report to the
Charlotte County
Commission**

Presented April 16, 2013

OVERVIEW

At the direction of the Charlotte County Board of Commissioners, Charlotte County Utilities contracted with a consulting group led by Banks Engineering to undertake the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program to evaluate different options for wastewater service available to the East-West Spring Lake area.

As part of this project, Banks Engineering convened a Stakeholder Committee to consider information related to the Wastewater Pilot Program and provide input to the Charlotte County Commission.

The Stakeholder Committee was comprised of both East-West Spring Lake residents and representatives of community groups.

All property owners in East-West Spring Lake received a letter of invitation to apply for the Stakeholder Committee if they were interested. A total of 49 residents applied. A random selection process identified 15 resident members; three of those who were selected ultimately declined due to scheduling conflicts and were replaced by other randomly selected residents.

Community groups invited to participate included the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce, Curmudgeon Club, Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council, Charlotte County Board of Realtors, Sierra Club, Marine Advisory Committee, Team Punta Gorda, and the Charlotte-DeSoto Building Industry Association. Sierra Club was the only group to decline the invitation to participate.

A news release was distributed to all local media announcing the formation of the Stakeholder Committee for the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program with dates of all Committee meetings and Community Open House opportunities for questions and discussion.

STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Nineteen of the 22 members of the Stakeholder Committee convened for the first time on Wednesday, January 30, in the Training Room of Charlotte County Utilities. The meeting was facilitated by Joy Hazell from University of Florida/IFAS/Florida Sea Grant. Todd Rebol of Banks Engineering provided a historical overview and current status of the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program. *The January 30 Stakeholder Committee Meeting Report appears as Appendix A.*

The second Stakeholder Committee meeting was convened on Wednesday, February 27, and was again facilitated by Joy Hazell. Nineteen Committee members attended. Jim Miller, Project Manager for the Marco Island Septic Tank Replacement Program, provided information on Marco Island's transition to sewer and answered questions. Todd Rebol gave a presentation generally comparing septic and sewer for cost, environmental impact, maintenance, and reliability. *The February 27 Stakeholder Committee Meeting Report appears as Appendix B.*

Todd Rebol served as the facilitator for the third Stakeholder Committee meeting held Tuesday, March 12 (Joy Hazell had a conflict). Karen Bickford, TMDL Coordinator for Lee County Natural Resources, was a guest presenter on water quality. Following Ms. Bickford's presentation, the group asked numerous questions to learn more about nutrient loads, water quality standards, federal mandates and other related issues. The group then agreed on the general points to make in this final report to the Board of County Commissioners. *The March 12 Stakeholder Committee Meeting Report appears as Appendix C.*

Approximately 15 members of the public attended each of the Stakeholder Committee meetings. They were able to submit comments and questions in writing; those questions were provided to the meeting facilitator and included in the meeting reports.

PUBLIC OPEN HOUSES

Members of the project team and representatives from Charlotte County Utilities participated in three Public Open Houses held in proximity to the Stakeholder Committee meetings (within 48 hours) to allow residents to ask questions and discuss the pilot program. The Open Houses were held in the training rooms at CCU.

Guests were able to view project maps, review financial information and projected costs for homeowners and landowners, and see components and photos of the sewer system being considered.

The first meeting drew 14 guests; the second brought nine; and the third meeting saw 12. Some of the participants came to all three meetings, and some of the participants also observed the Stakeholder Committee meetings.

STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEE INPUT

After addressing the benefits and concerns of the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program, the Stakeholder Committee discussed the input they wanted to provide to the County Commissioners.

The consensus of the Committee was that the Commission should move forward with the proposed program; however, Committee members wanted to recommend that the following stipulations be considered as part of the program.

1. **Financial Hardship.** The Committee is concerned that many residents in the program area may be unable to afford the proposed costs of the program. The Committee suggests that the BCC consider the creation of a Financial Hardship Program as part of the project to address this concern.

2. **Financial Deferment.** The Committee asks that the BCC consider the ability for some residents to defer the costs of the project in the form of a lien on their property, which may be collected by the county at the time of sale of the home. The deferment process should be considered for those who have a financial hardship or other unforeseen circumstances.
3. **Rebate Program.** The Committee suggests that the BCC consider a fair Rebate Program for those residents who have recently completed costly replacements of their existing septic systems. The Rebate Program would help those individuals recapture some of their investment prior to having to begin payment on the proposed sewer program.
4. **Cash Pay-Out Option.** The committee supports the BCC offering a cash pay-out option for those individuals who have the ability to pay in full at the onset of the program in order to save on interest/fees that are included within the program.
5. **Alternative Funding Options.** The Committee recommends that the county continue to pursue all means of alternative funding in order to reduce the cost of the program to the residents. Some of the funding instruments that were discussed by Committee members include a one-cent sales tax, state and federal grants, and a countywide tax that would spread the burden across all residents to benefit improved water quality in Charlotte Harbor. The countywide tax could be limited to those areas where sewer will eventually be installed, excluding residents who already have (and have paid for) sewer systems.

6. **Short-Term Septic Repair Program.** If the program moves forward, the Committee suggests that Charlotte County assist any residents who have repairs that are needed to operate their septic systems prior to being connected to the proposed central sewer system. This would ensure that residents would not have to make further investment into systems that will be abandoned upon completion of the program. Additionally, this will help residents to maintain regulatory conformance with the Department of Health.

7. **Master Wastewater Expansion Program.** The Committee recommends that the County develop a master plan to expand wastewater service to all areas within urban areas of the County that are currently served by septic systems only. The concern is that if only the proposed pilot program is completed and no additional expansion is performed, then the underlying goal of improving water quality will not be met. This would result in a financial burden for the residents of the East-West Spring Lake area – which is only a small portion of the total area in the County that is in need of wastewater service – for a very small gain toward the larger goal of water quality improvement.

CONCLUSION

The Stakeholder Committee members committed a great deal of time to this process and to discussing benefits and concerns related to the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program. Their input and stipulations are deserving of careful consideration by the Charlotte County Commissioners as a final decision is made regarding this project.

APPENDIX A

East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program Stakeholder Committee Meeting Report Wednesday, January 30, 2013 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

On Wednesday, January 30th, Banks Engineering held the first in a series of East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program stakeholder committee meeting. Nineteen stakeholders attended the meeting which was convened by Todd Rebol of Banks Engineering and facilitated by Joy Hazell from University of Florida/IFAS/Florida Sea Grant. Stakeholders represented seven community groups including the Chamber of Commerce, Team Punta Gorda, and the Curmudgeon Club. The balance of the committee was filled with 12 residents of the pilot community. The residents were randomly selected to be on the committee from a pool of interested parties. The workshop objectives were to:

- Provide information on the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program
- Gather input from a wide variety of stakeholders on the benefits and concerns of the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program

The workshop began with introductions and an explanation and affirmation of stakeholder committee goals and the meeting objectives. Participants were then asked to share their favorite memory of Charlotte Harbor as a way of establishing common ground. Participants generated ground rules to guide this and subsequent meetings. The ground rules were agreed on by all members of the group and adopted. (Appendix A.) The ground rules included the establishment of a parking lot to record ideas that were important but not directly related to the discussion. (Appendix B.) The parking lot is a record written visibly on a large flip chart of important items, ideas and issues that may be tangential to the discussion or meeting objectives. The items on the parking lot will be addressed later in the discussion or at a follow-up meeting.

Todd Rebol gave a presentation detailing the history and current status of the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program. Participants were given 15 minutes to ask questions which ranged from specifics on when wastewater utility charges would begin to how the program would be funded to more general questions including how residents are supposed to manage current septic problems while the pilot program remains undecided. Many of the participants' questions and answers can be found in a frequently asked questions document:

<http://charlottefl.com/outreach/ccu/Projects/SpringLake/FAQ.pdf>.

Participants were asked to brainstorm benefits and concerns they had about the pilot program assuming it was adopted as is. They wrote their benefits and concerns on individual large sticky notes and hung them on the wall. The facilitator read the benefits and concerns out loud so the group could hear everyone's ideas and for clarification. The results of the brainstorm are listed in Table 1.

The public was also welcome at the meeting and provided their input in writing. Their comments and questions are listed in Appendix C.

Table 1. Results of Program Benefits and Concerns Brainstorm

Benefits	Concerns
Residents able to finance and extend the cost.	Establishing expectations of the cost of replacement may make replacement challenging for future projects
Meets government regulations	Phasing vs. demand
Cleaner harbor	Increased costs of monthly utilities bill and timing of the increase
No more worries about septic	Residential access to their private homes while construction is taking place
Low interest repayment stretched over 20 years	Disruption of street during construction
Financial risk transfer benefits homeowner	Maintenance cost of sewer
For people with families it would help reduce cost of having tanks pumped frequently	Residents not having the option to handle own connection and demo
Long term economic and environmental benefit to homeowner and the county	Initial cost
Abandons existing tanks and drainfields versus low pressure system that still has a tank	Cost for vacant lots
Clean harbor	High cost per unit
Water Quality	Home values decrease while cost of managing wastewater increases – if home values stay down residents won't recoup costs
Increased tourism	Want all people on board so there isn't delays once started
Value increase of your home when finished	Construction planning and methods. Construction professionals should participate during both the conceptual and detail design
Increased property values	Pilot program must be part of a comprehensive program. Doesn't make sense as a standalone program!
Connections completed at the same time	Time it will take to complete the county
House selling value	People seem to be walking away from properties. Who pays the cost of sewers for these properties
\$10,000 over 20 years instead of \$15,000 out of pocket to replace septic system	Cost
Quality of life	Timing for completion
Increased property values	I think many people in this area cannot afford the cost
Would help with foul odors which emanate from tanks not taken care of	If there is a cost overrun who pays
Increase value of the property	Less income now than in the past – how do you expect us to pay for this?
Avoidance of federal mandate as a result of not converting – relinquishing local control	Costs
	Beach closure data is fuzzy so why base project on it?
	Rebates for people with new septic systems

As a final activity participants agreed to next steps including grouping and prioritizing benefits and concerns and proposing solutions to the concerns at the next meeting. They also asked for more information on the following topics:

- Science behind the septic versus sewer debate and which is the better option
- Localities (city/county/community) with similar natural context who have information on water quality prior to conversion to sewer and after conversion to sewer
- A detailed cost breakdown of project
- Potential consequences of not converting
- Cost breakdown of Cape Coral vs. East West Spring Lake

The meeting leader and facilitator agreed to gather the requested information for the February meeting. The meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Appendix A. Ground Rules

- Cell phones on vibrate
- No yelling
- Speak in turn
- Be brief
- No side bars
- Stay on point
- Move on when topic is finished
- Listen actively
- Do not interrupt
- Tell the truth
- Use parking lot

Appendix B. Parking Lot

- Has criteria for fecal coliform changed between 2002 and 2012?
- How will the project be financed? – Answer: State Revolving Funds
- What if someone currently has a problem with their septic system, do they have a grace period?
- Is there a possibility of the entire county paying for conversion versus an MSBU?
- MSBU may be better accepted
- Request for a map of Charlotte County with septic and sewer coverage highlighted
- Cost/benefit analysis of the replacement of septic systems with updated ones versus conversion to sewer

Appendix B. Public Comment

- Most residents in this program area have had septic system emptied and inspected five years ago and are being notified by state that their permit is expiring and a new inspection and permit is now required. Why do this if the project is going forward? Will there be some sort of finance consideration or “credit” if this is done – or if a whole new system is required.
- Costs-many vacant lots are just about valued at \$6,000 to sell, adding another \$6,100 would make lots unsellable.
- How is water use (car wash, water lawn etc.) going to be billed? Is it water in/water out billing?
- Where can I see water testing results?
- Concern: suppose that the new system goes in; what will be the monthly or yearly sewer bill on our taxes or is the \$9,900 assessment being discussed the only tax and or billing we will get from the county.

- Wastewater under the present system, especially near the lagoon and canals, is my major concern. The expansion needs to be approved if only to address eventual contamination of all our waterways that will impact the entire area. However, the expansion needs to factor in those residents who have new or recent septic tanks that can be adapted and connected to whatever expansion project is approved so as to save these residents the extra expense of removing newer septic tanks – say within 5 years and in good condition.
- We wish to be counted as pro-sewer.
- Septic system working fine. Five year inspection good idea. Enforcement should be recorded when repairs are done.

APPENDIX B

East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program Stakeholder Committee Meeting Report Wednesday, February 27, 2013 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

On Wednesday, February 27th, Banks Engineering held the second in a series of East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program stakeholder committee meeting. Nineteen stakeholders attended the meeting which was convened by Todd Rebol of Banks Engineering and facilitated by Joy Hazell from University of Florida/IFAS/Florida Sea Grant. Stakeholders represented seven community groups including the Chamber of Commerce, Team Punta Gorda, and the Curmudgeon Club. The balance of the committee was filled with residents of the pilot community. The residents were randomly selected to be on the committee from a pool of interested parties. The workshop objectives were to:

- Provide information on the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program
- Prioritize East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program benefits and concerns
- Brainstorm possible solutions to the concerns

The workshop began with a short icebreaker and an affirmation of stakeholder committee goals, meeting objectives and the ground rules, which were generated at the initial meeting. A guest speaker, Jim Miller was introduced to meeting participants. Jim Miller is the Project Manager of the Marco Island, FL [Septic Tank Replacement Program](#). He was invited to provide information on Marco Island's transition to sewer and answer any questions the stakeholders might have on how the program worked in Marco Island.

Todd Rebol gave a presentation outlining a general comparison of septic and sewer. It included comparisons of cost, environmental impact, maintenance, and reliability. Participants took almost the entire remainder of the time given asking questions of Todd and Jim. Questions and concerns included:

- If you need a new septic system now, when would the new central system program start assuming it is approved?
- How many systems have failed inspection?
- Has anything been done to research our funding position on State Revolving Fund to secure a low interest rate?
- How is Charlotte County providing for future sewer expansion programs? Would these programs be at the same interest rate?

Participants were then asked to spend 10 minutes discussing what they would like to see at the next meeting. There was an approximate 50/50 split between those wanting more information from a water quality expert and those wishing to move the stakeholder input process forward. Additional comments included the following:

- Get the stakeholders involved at the very beginning when starting a phase II if that occurs
- A master plan is needed for the entire county on septic (if we need sewer so does the rest of Port Charlotte that is currently on septic)

The next meeting will be held Tuesday, March 12, 2013 from 2:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. The guest speaker will be the TMDL coordinator for Lee County, Karen Bickford and the meeting will focus on moving the group forward to provide input the Board of County Commissioners on the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program.

Additional Comments received from General Public:

- This is not the first time a central sewer system (CSS) has been considered for this area. If the decision to continue with septic systems goes forward – there is a reasonable chance the issue of a CSS will come up again! At an increased inflated cost with time. This as an important point to make when costs are compared. It is feasible to continue paying for repairs on a septic system for another x number of years and still have a CSS installed 5-10 years from now. I strongly support a CSS now vs later on a 20-year prorated basis; I don't want to pay for a CSS upfront when I won't be here for the life of a CSS.
- County installed some kind of pipe on corner lots to see if there is sewage into groundwater. Are we going to see results??
- County spends money on Murdock Village, Parkside, etc. Why can't we as a county find a way to pay for sewer projects as opposed to billing residents directly!
- Sidewalks or bike lanes or both on Pt. Charlotte Blvd. Back water valve to street.
- Back water valves should absolutely be installed. Other than that, go for it.
- General concern about providing financial hardship funding for some who maybe can't afford the sewer and a possible credit/rebate program for those who recently put in a septic system

APPENDIX C

East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program Stakeholder Committee Meeting Report Tuesday, March 12, 2013 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

On Tuesday, March 12, Banks Engineering held the third in a series of East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program Stakeholder Committee meetings. Thirteen (13) stakeholders attended the meeting, which was convened and facilitated by Todd Rebol of Banks Engineering. Stakeholders represented seven community groups including the Chamber of Commerce, Team Punta Gorda, and the Curmudgeon Club. The balance of the committee was filled with residents of the pilot community. The residents were randomly selected to be on the committee from a pool of interested parties. The workshop objectives were to:

- Provide information on the East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program
- Prioritize East-West Spring Lake Wastewater Pilot Program benefits and concerns
- Brainstorm possible solutions to the concerns
- Develop input for the Charlotte County Board of Commissioners

The workshop began with a short overview of the work to-date of the Stakeholder Committee. A guest speaker, Karen Bickford, TMDL Coordinator for Lee County, made a presentation regarding water quality. She discussed water quality standards and nutrient loads; she presented a case study from the Florida Keys regarding septic vs. sewer and impacts on water quality; and she identified other communities choosing sewer, including Lee County, Port St. Lucie, Tampa Bay and Wekiva Springs, among others. Ms. Bickford also discussed nutrient loads and how they can impact county reporting and permits.

A member of the Committee asked how the East-West Spring Lake area got selected as the Pilot Program for wastewater expansion. The group commenced a discussion about Charlotte County's compulsion to comply with the State's water quality standards, as identified in the county's 2005-2009 Capital Improvement Program (CIP). The East-West Spring Lake area was identified by the State as the top priority.

The group moved into discussion of the input it would like to provide to the Board of County Commissioners. The report will be developed accordingly and provided to the group for review and comment in advance of presentation to the Commissioners by Todd Rebol during an April workshop. The basic tenets of the Committee's comments about moving forward with the Pilot Program are as follows:

Providing hardship funding/deferment; providing a discounted up-front cash pay-out; providing a rebate for newly installed septic systems; providing an alternative funding source for all or part of the project, such as sales tax; having CCU assist with band-aid repairs of failing septic systems until completion of the wastewater expansion program;

and county moving forward with a master wastewater expansion plan for all of the urban service area where septic systems are being used.

The Stakeholder Committee members who were present agreed that the tentative meeting date of April 2 was not necessary; therefore, there will be no meeting on April 2.

Fourteen members of the General Public signed in for the meeting. One comment card was received:

- Why not use proportional allocation on water usage basis of both capital project cost recovery and yearly operational costs? This would address the single largest obstacle for affected public acceptance – FAIRNESS! It avoids the “negative” terms of assessment on a property, amortization or time payments, etc. I am a former state agency and county auditor; university professor of accounting; nationally certified behavioral assessor; and software project coordinator for Charlotte County Clerk of Courts and Board of County Commissioners. Signed, Paul Frazier [contact information excluded from this public report]