

Not everyone sold on septic conversion

THE SEWERING

By **ANDREA PRAEGITZER**

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Don Monroe lives on a deadend street in the El Jobean area of Port Charlotte, where he's got a steady food supply in the canal behind his home.

He fishes, boats and eats what he catches in the canal.

And after 15 years of living along Bardot Road, Monroe said he has never observed excessive algae.

Still, some scientists have highlighted septic systems in areas not ideal for them to function, like where Monroe lives, as a top reason for poor water quality and harmful algae blooms. It's also a reason some local governments in Southwest Florida give for why planned septic-to-sewer conversions are essential.

But not everyone agrees.

Paperwork

"I think I'm going to sell and leave," Monroe said, while holding paperwork the county sent him to be signed and notarized.

The conversions are really about the county making money, according to Monroe, a seasonal resident. He said he is appalled by the situation and doesn't believe his septic system is polluting waterways.

Monroe also said he doesn't understand why residents who are already taxed by government are required to pay more for the conversions. And, he said, when he bought his land and built his home, he didn't know the required sewer conversions were coming.

Paperwork the county sent him says it will collect up to \$10.6 million from property tax bills of residents living in the El Jobean Wastewater project area over the next 20 years. But the letter notes that revenue received depends on "participating tax parcels."

Meanwhile, the project in Monroe's part of town was expected last year to cost \$9.2 million, according to the county's sewer master plan. El Jobean is just one of a dozen project areas in the county's 5-year septic-to-sewer improvement plan, which according to information from



A screenshot of a recent septic-to-sewer conversion in Charlotte County from a video the county produced detailing its Sewer Master Plan.

PHOTO PROVIDED

The table below lists the S2S project areas identified in the 5-year Improvement Plan, including the project area name and estimated project costs in 2017 dollars. The project costs include the costs for on- and off-lot connections, collection piping, pump stations, restoration, mobilization and general conditions (8%), contingency (20%), and professional services (20%).

Project Name	Project Cost
El Jobean East	\$9,180,795
Crestview Circle	\$1,100,000
Ellicott Circle	\$3,600,000
Seacrest	\$7,300,000
Lakeview Corridor	\$10,000,000
Yorkshire Ph I	\$10,400,000
Hurtig	\$7,400,000
Yorkshire Ph II	\$4,600,000
Ackerman East	\$12,900,000
Ackerman West	\$13,500,000
Cape Haze Ph I	\$2,100,000
Cape Haze Ph II	\$3,300,000
Total	\$85,380,795
L.G.I.*	\$10,400,000
Don Pedro*	\$6,300,000
Total	\$16,700,000

* Private Utility

CHART FROM CHARLOTTE COUNTY

These are the Project costs and names for the septic-to-sewer conversion planned in Charlotte County over the next five years.

CHART FROM CHARLOTTE COUNTY



Charlotte County resident Don Monroe stands in front of his home and the area of his septic system, which is below lush vegetation growing above. Monroe lives in the El Jobean area, where the county is planning to undergo its next phase of septic-to-sewer conversions in the name of water quality, however Monroe does not agree that his system constructed about 15 years ago is polluting area waterways.

SUN PHOTO BY ANDREA PRAEGITZER

the county, involves 300 properties.

The county's east/ west Spring Lake pilot septic-to-sewer project started in 2014 and has hooked up more than 1,200 properties with hundreds more coming through March of next year.

But for the upcoming El Jobean project, the county's Sept. 4 letter tells Monroe — who lives on what he considers one lot with one house, and owns the lot next door — that he actually has four “equivalent residential connections.”

The total amount to be levied to him would be \$575 per connection annually, or \$46,000 over 20 years, according to the letter, which notes “failure to pay your assessments appearing on the ad valorem tax bill will cause a tax certificate to be issued against the property which may result in a loss of title.”

But, it notes that property owners like Monroe with vacant tax parcels can defer the assessment until those parcels are also “improved.” So Monroe could only end up paying \$11,500 for one connection over 20 years — if he signs another piece of paper from the county called a Declaration of Unity of Title by Nov. 1, and has it notarized.

That, however, would restrict his ability to develop or sell portions of his property without getting a release from the county. And then the property owner would need to pay the full cost for the tax parcel for the sewer collection facilities, plus applicable interest and other costs.

“This is trickle-down extortion,” said Monroe.

Monroe said other residents in El Jobean have just one home on lots the county is considering as two connections. He said that's just another reason why he believes there is an attempt to make more than necessary off people for the conversions.

“The sewer assessment is truly a non-ad valorem special assessment,” he said. “Unlike fire, street and drainage that are ongoing assessments and belong on the ad valorem portion of the tax bill. Why is it being placed on the ad valorem tax?”

According to the county, the financial strategy for the Sewer Master Plan is to “assign just, equitable, and affordable costs to property owners and find an achievable level of outside funding while having no adverse effect on existing utilities rate payers.”

The county planned septic-to-sewer conversions over five years involving 14 project areas, covering lot connections, piping, pump stations, and various other services. Project funding was expected to include a combination of sales tax, grants, annual new user revenue, customer contributions and other means, according to the county's sewer master plan.

The letter Monroe got from the county says property owners “are encouraged to consult with an attorney prior to executing a Declaration of Unity of Title.”

And that's just another expense, which he said he shouldn't have to bear.

The county advises in its letter to residents that commissioners will hold a public hearing Nov. 13 to hear “comments on the proposed assessments, including collection on the ad valorem tax bill.” That falls after the Nov. 1 due date stated in the county’s letter for when unity of titles must be completed.

Monroe said he tried to take his frustration and questions recently to a county trailer set up across the canal from his home. It’s been holding office hours to help people sign and notarize their paperwork. Monroe said he was trying to deter people from signing, and that he had rented spaces where the trailer was located at the El Jobean Boat ramp.

He said law enforcement threatened to arrest him, which was a first for him, and now he’s not allowed back.

Indeed, the county has heard from residents, but officials have said comments have been a mixed bag.

“We have received both complaints and praises regarding the sewers,” said Caroline Wannall, Charlotte County utilities spokesperson. “Some of the complaints are regarding the individual cost of the conversion or that septic tanks are a better option than sewer. The praises are from those who live in coastal areas and their septic tanks are failing. The sewers will provide them much relief.”

Charlotte County had connected 1,217 homes as of Aug. 20 through its east/west Spring Lake pilot program, which had an estimated cost of over \$36 million.

Gary Bartoloni owns one of those homes, and like Monroe, he’s not happy about losing his septic system and being forced to pay to convert to sewer.

“I call it a money grab,” Bartoloni said about why he thinks the county is moving forward with the conversions.

He also said he never had any reason to believe his septic system was hurting the environment, and is also not OK with the conversion costs he must pay.

Bartoloni said he lives on a fixed income and applied for the county’s hardship program, which if he had been approved would have meant he wouldn’t have to pay about \$500 extra on his annual property taxes for the conversion. He also has to pay now for sewer services.

“If you had to design a perfect hardship recipient it’s me,” he said, noting the county considered his reverse mortgage as income and he believes that’s wrong. “I’m stuck here, I’m stuck with this.”

The income limit for the hardship program this year for one person is \$32,700. In 2013, 92 residents qualified. Last year, that dropped to 32, and so far this year there have been 24 hardship cases, according to the county.

Still, there had not been any legal challenges to the the county’s hardship program, Wannall confirmed, noting the county is not bound by the IRS definition of income when determining eligibility.

Same speed ahead

Charlotte County’s master plan for its septic- to-sewer conversion hasn’t changed in light of this year’s widely publicized harmful algae issues.

A preliminary plan for conversions in Punta Gorda was announced just this summer, though.

Sarasota County’s conversions outside the city of Sarasota are continuing, just as they have for years and the latest algae blooms in Southwest Florida haven’t sped that up.

Meanwhile, city staff in North Port has had some internal discussions about the future of thousands of septic systems in their city limits, but the latest bloom also isn’t pushing them forward more quickly.

Most of Englewood is hooked up to the Englewood Water District's vacuum sewer collection system, as are most large subdivisions like Rotonda West.

Still, it's red tide and harmful algae blooms that were cited in Charlotte County's master plan documents as a reason why conversions need to happen.

"Environmental studies have shown that excess nutrients and bacteria from septic systems in dense, coastal areas are having a negative impact on Charlotte Harbor," according to information from Charlotte County Utilities.

And a combination of unsuitable soils, high water tables and aging septic systems allows untreated sewage to percolate through the soil, states the Master Plan summary. "It enters the groundwater where it is conveyed to canals, rivers, creeks and estuarine shorelines — transporting high levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, fecal microbes, and organic sewage contaminants to the harbor. These contaminants decrease water clarity, contribute to excess algae growth, sustain harmful algae blooms, and lead to red tide events."

The Peace and Myakka rivers, which flow through Charlotte County and discharge into Upper Charlotte Harbor are listed as "impaired" by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Recent estimates showed there were around 27,000 septic systems in Charlotte County Utility's service area, and 45,000 of them across the entire county.

The 5-year plan from the county involved converting 4,769 septic systems to sewer spanning 14 project areas at a total cost of more than \$102 million.

The county has also identified another 30 project areas where conversions could happen more than 15 years from now.

Meanwhile, Punta Gorda, the only municipality in the county, is starting to plan a septic- to-sewer conversion project. The City Council approved the project concept in June and Charlotte Park is expected to be the first project area.

"The deteriorating water quality in the city has been largely attributed to nutrient and bacteria loads originating from on site treatment and disposal systems, more commonly referred to as septic systems," wrote Punta Gorda City Manager Howard Kunik in the *Sun* in July.

"Nearly all of the septic system effluents are ultimately conveyed to Charlotte Harbor once it enters the groundwater," Kunik wrote. "Excessive amounts of nitrogen promote growth within the waterways — contributing to and sustaining the formation of harmful algae blooms."

In Punta Gorda, there are about 2,700 septic systems from the 1970s into the 2000s, and within the next nine years or so, those will likely be converted to sewer along with more infrastructure for it all. The estimated cost at build out is about \$82 million, Kunik wrote.

Over in Sarasota County, just outside city limits of Sarasota, the Phillippi Creek septic-to-sewer conversion program has gone on for almost 20 years and is about 65 percent complete, involving a \$119 million cost, according to Sarasota County spokesperson Drew Winchester.

Sarasota County has 79,753 active sewer accounts, but there are no plans for conversions in unincorporated portions of southern Sarasota County, like South Venice, which are still on septic. There's also no funding for that, according to Winchester.

"Regarding the number of parcels that are not on active sewer accounts, staff does not have an exact number," Winchester said about unincorporated Sarasota County. "We are not requiring those properties, developed or undeveloped to come online at this time."

And Winchester said: “The current red tide conditions are not influencing any program schedules.”

Like conversions in Charlotte County, those in Sarasota County and those expected in Punta Gorda, also involve affected homeowners paying part of the costs.

Further inland in the incorporated city of North Port, there are no conversion projects going on, though an estimated 17,600 septic systems are in city limits.

Anna Duffy, a spokesperson for North Port Utilities Department, confirmed there have been some internal discussions about the issue of septic-to-sewer conversions to promote water quality but there are no specific plans.

“West Villages is currently building or planning to build a wastewater plant, which they will hand over to the city for future growth there,” said North Port spokesperson Josh Taylor.

Email: Apraegitzer@sun-herald.com