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NORTH PORT

North Port well problems boost city water's appeal

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Oak Henthorn doesn't drink the water coming from his faucets.

He won't cook with it either.

Henthorn's home, like thousands of others in North Port, relies on a well. The water smells like sulfur, Henthorn said, and it comes with hidden costs.

"The water is really hard on the equipment," said Henthorn, 54. "You have to replace your faucets every couple of years. ... We've replaced the well pumps three times. We've pretty much rebuilt the system once already."

But Henthorn sees a solution on the horizon, one that doesn't require buying bottled water.

This month North Port began construction on a \$1.8 million pilot project that will bring city water lines to the Madagascar neighborhood where Henthorn lives. It is a relatively small initiative, with a much larger purpose: to begin to bring more city services to Sarasota County's largest and fastest-growing municipality.

North Port is a particular challenge because, incorporating 104 square miles, it is one of the largest cities geographically in Florida. By contrast, Sarasota is 25 square miles and Bradenton 14 square miles. Thousands of homes were built without connection to city water and sewers. Bringing those services in years later is expensive and requires support from residents to cover the costs.

By October, 230 homes in the Madagascar neighborhood should have the option to connect to city water. Any new homes built in the neighborhood will be required to connect.

Homeowners will have to pay the city's utilities department about \$5,500 over time to connect. There are additional costs for a backflow prevention device and to bring a line from a resident's house to the city water line.

Residents who connect will receive a monthly utility bill for their water consumption.

The number of homes that participate in the voluntary pilot program will help city leaders decide whether it is financially viable to expand public water lines to other areas of North Port.

Governments across Florida have struggled to bring water, sewers and other infrastructure to existing areas that did not require them when the neighborhood were built, often decades earlier.

But the cost of bringing services to developed neighborhoods is challenging in pre-

platted communities like North Port, Port Charlotte, Port St. Lucie and Cape Coral, North Port Utilities Business Manager Jennifer Desrosiers said.

“Several years back it was estimated it would cost more than \$2 billion to get water and sewer for the entire city,” she said.

The root of the problem is as old as North Port itself.

When General Development Corporation incorporated North Port, known then as North Port Charlotte, in 1959, it platted almost the entire city into quarter-acre lots. Desrosiers said the company planned to extend water and sewer to all of the lots, but that vision fell apart when the company went bankrupt in the early 1990s.

North Port quickly bought GDC's existing water system, which at the time was concentrated in the southwest corner of the city and had about 7,000 customers.

“We kind of inherited this half constructed system,” Desrosiers said. “They would just bring the line out to their workers or where the new residents would live. They didn't make it a looped system.”

GDC left behind 73,000 platted lots, most without city water lines. As houses were built on those lots, wells and septic tanks accompanied them.

Since then water lines have been added to some areas of North Port.

That's because in the mid-90s the city began requiring developers to pay for and install city water lines when they developed new neighborhoods. Heron Creek and Sabal Trace are two examples.

Today, North Port has about 14,600 city water accounts for single family homes. The utilities department has seen a demand for more.

“We answer 4,000 phone calls a month in this department, and a good chunk of the calls are people that are upset because they have wells that aren't doing well,” Desrosiers said. “The water quality is not good. Some people even move because they can't deal with the water.”

Previous plans to expand water and sewer services were put on hold during the economic downturn, but Desrosiers said the city is now financially stable enough to launch a pilot program.

In 2013 the city completed \$9.5 million in reliability upgrades at its water treatment plant, including the installation of a reverse-osmosis system. The plant can be expanded to accommodate more customers.

In June 2014, city commissioners approved the water expansion pilot program for the Madagascar neighborhood. The location was selected in part because of its residents' high demand for city water.

As the city prepares to provide water to the residents of the neighborhood, it faces another hurdle. Due to vested rights, homeowners with wells can't be forced to connect to city water.

And some residents, like 74-year-old Norman Bouffard, aren't so sure they're ready to switch.

“I've spent a lot of money on my water system,” Bouffard said, listing off resin tanks, carbon tanks and water softeners. “I don't know if it's worth it for me to hook up yet.”

Desrosiers said North Port hopes residents will decide the cost of getting city water is

worth the benefits.

Among those benefits is that residents will no longer spend time and money on maintaining their well system. Instead, North Port will be responsible for making sure water quality meets or exceeds standards set by the state and federal governments.

City water will also continue to work even if a hooked-up home loses electricity.

For Bruce Bennett, a 77-year-old resident of the Madagascar neighborhood, the reason for having city water is simple.

“I had a bottle of it the other night, and it was tasty,” he said. “Much tastier than what I have now.”

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