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North Port commission takes initial steps towards citywide sewer

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North Port city commissioners approved both a plan to expand water and sewer within the city and the design of the first of the 29 phases on Monday night. Pictured from left: Commissioner Debbie McDowell, Commissioner Alice White, Mayor Jill Luke, Vice Mayor Pete Emrich, and Commissioner Barbara Langdon.

The city of North Port has both a plan to expand water and sewer within 29 areas of the city originally planned by General Development Corp. as well as funding for design of the first of those phases, after a 3-2 vote Monday night.

But the five-member City Commission is still a long way from green-lighting a major residential expansion that many residents feel will hurt them financially.

All three board members who approved a \$474,796 design contract with Kimley Horn & Associates for design of the first phase pledged to not approve starting any expansion that was too costly for residents.

Mayor Jill Luke stressed that the commission doesn't "want to put any burden on the taxpayer whatsoever."

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“Staff has already stated that the plan can sit on the shelf until funding comes along but you're barred from stuff until you at least have a plan that's put in place,” Luke said.

Commissioner Barbara Langdon said she would want to see a funding model cap resident payment at 50% of the hookup cost, as well as a plan to generate revenue to pay for the rest of the cost of expansion.

“We all need to look at surtax revenue and see what percentage of that we can be putting aside,” Langon said in reference to the local sales tax, then later added that approval of design for the first phase kept North Port “in the game” for state and federal grant funds.

Commissioner Alice White stressed that the design plan was key to figuring out what the actual cost to hook up to water and sewer would be.

“And we can only have that if we have a plan in place,” she added.

The board members who opposed funding the design were more emphatic in their disapproval.

“I dissented because there's no guarantee we're going to get a grant there's no guarantee on any of this,” said Council Member Debbie McDowell, who voted against awarding the contract, as did Vice Mayor Pete Emrich. “To me we just took \$500,000 and flushed it right down the toilet.”

Emrich thought approval of the master plan, created by Giffels-Webster, was commitment enough.

“At this point in time, I believe this is wasteful spending,” Emrich said. “There are so many unknowns involved in what's going on right now that I believe can wait.”

Among the unknowns whether city septic systems contribute to a pollution problem for Charlotte Harbor, as water drains through the Cocoplum Waterway and the Myakkahatchee Creek, since the city does not test for that water quality.

Complicating that is the fact that most traditional septic systems do not address nitrogen runoff, though more modern advanced treatment systems do.

Interim City Manager Jason Yarborough said Charlotte County is going to start to test the Cocoplum runoff into Charlotte Harbor and he would work with county officials on the monitoring plan, to see if North Port must conduct its own tests.

All five city commissioners voted in favor of adopting the Giffels-Webster plan, which calls for installing water and sewer within 29 areas of the city.

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The adoption came with the caveat that than an existing map would include roads, canals and other landmarks so homeowners can see exactly where they are on the map.

North Post Estates, a large-lot subdivision that will never be dense enough for water and sewer extension and Lake Geraldine – a large-lot subdivision on the west side of the Myakka River, are exempt from the expansion.

The incorporated portion of Wellen Park, which is being developed through the West Villages Improvement District, is already hooked into city water and sewer.

A legacy of lots from General Development Corp.

As of May 2019, there were 11,158 homes east of the Myakka River in North Port that are already on water and sewer. Most of those were platted after a 1972 state law that mandated new homes be hooked into water and sewer.

There are also 16,332 occupied parcels on septic systems.

That leaves 28,322 undeveloped, 80-foot by 120-foot lots originally platted by General Development Corp. that are grandfathered in for well-and-septic service, should the owners choose to build there.

The sense of urgency to develop a plan to ultimately extend water and sewer lines to those homes on septic systems, as well as those potential home sites, is being driven by the passage of state Senate Bill 712, the Clean Waterways Act – which does not directly mandate the city hook residents up to sewer but does deal with water quality standards.

Terri Lowery, senior vice president and managing director of Gainesville-based Jones, Edmunds & Associates, presented an overview of that act, and talked about how Florida has 6.5% of the nation's population but 12% of its septic systems.

“It's a very serious issue we are facing all over the state of Florida,” said Lowery, who added that the state has already earmarked a portion of real estate sales tax revenue for water quality issues, along with resiliency and the fund's intended use of affordable housing.

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Terri Lowry, senior vice president and managing director of Gainesville, Florida-based Jones, Edmunds & Associates, presented an overview of the state Clean Waterways Act and the importance of having an actual designed plan for a shovel-ready project would impact grant applications.

A call for shovel-ready projects

On top of that \$500 million of the state's share of American Rescue Plan funds will be allocated to water and sewer projects.

"They'll be looking for shovel-ready projects," Lowery said, then later explained that merely having the master plan alone wouldn't count as shovel ready but an actual design project would.

"They are looking for communities to take the lead on how you move your project forward," she noted.

In response to an observation by McDowell that the city is inland and coastal counties are in greater need, Lowery pointed out that both Marion and Seminole counties are heavily involved in septic-to-sewer conversion projects and explained that the concern involves the impact on water bodies that ultimately drain into the gulf and not just a coastal community issue.

Lowery admitted that the DEP or the federal Environmental Protection Agency may not ask North Port to take action for five to 10 years.

"The reality is, is we have to start somewhere," she said, then later added, "Usually by the time DEP comes knocking on your door and says, 'You have to do this,' it's a crisis."

North Port resident Dan Beilman, who has both been hosting meetings on the North Port City Center Green to rally opposition to that water and sewer extension and publicizing those gatherings on Facebook, told the commission that in his opinion North Port isn't the main target of that legislation.

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“We’re putting the cart again in front of the horse,” said Beilman, who noted that Gov. Ron DeSantis said the first targets will be major waterways that impact blue green algae blooms.



Dan Beilman, a North Port resident who has been organizing community opposition citywide sewer expansion, said the proposed move is putting the cart before the horse and the additional expense would adversely impact existing homeowners

“We’re not on the major waterways, we not even close, we’re 18 miles away from the ocean,” said Beilman, who also noted that he did favor the commission pushing forward with extension of commercial sewer lines to bump up the city’s tax base.

All five board members favor prioritizing the extension of commercial sewer, particularly to the Panacea area north of the Toledo Blade Boulevard exit off of Interstate 75.

McDowell and Emrich wanted to take the sales tax money already set aside in the capital improvement plan for the Kimley Horn design project and apply it to finishing off the design of the projects extending sewer to Panacea, as well as north of the Sumter Boulevard exit off of I-75 or Warm Mineral Springs.

That vote didn't materialize, after City Attorney Amber Slayton pointed out that it wasn't a topic on the agenda.

Another vote against funding the design of that first phase of water and sewer extension, which would cover the area north of Blue Ridge Park north along Salford Boulevard, failed on a 3-2 vote, with Langdon, Luke and White in opposition.

Those same three ultimately voted on a subsequent motion to approve the funding.

The hope is that, after the year-long design project and study is complete, the city will have a shovel-ready project to pitch for grant funds, as well as firm costs of what residents would have to pay to hook into a system.

At the same time, if funds aren't available after the design study is complete, the plans could be shelved until additional money is available.

<https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/local/2021/05/18/north-port-commission-takes-initial-steps-towards-citywide-sewer/511967800>