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## Weak economy helps, hinders

### Bids come in lower, but homeowners hard pressed to pay

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As construction grinds to a halt elsewhere in Cape Coral, about 500 workers, supervisors and engineers are drawing a paycheck from the largest infrastructure project the Cape has ever seen.

While the plan to bring drinking water, irrigation water and centralized sewers to the young city moves along, politicians are searching for a balance between planning for the future and contending with today's economic realities.

"The only way you can really bring in the economic base is to have the infrastructure," said District 4 council member Dolores Bertolini. "Utilities and infrastructure are what make a city go. And this is a fledgling city. We're just coming out of the egg and the economy hit us."

Most council members say the economy's slap is unlikely to halt work on areas south of Pine Island Road, but the expansion in the north of the city, set to continue through 2017, is on shaky ground.

Against the suggestion of the projects' architects, District 6 council member Tim Day has proposed bringing only drinking water to the north Cape and forgoing the centralized sewer system in an effort to save his constituents money.

"The knockout punch in this economy would be to put in the centralized sewer system right now," Day said. "This is too much."

Day said he was sure that the fees assigned to homeowners to pay for the sewer system could be enough to push them out of Cape Coral.

Septic tanks, the current method for disposing of wastewater in the north, bring with them environmental concerns should they leach into the water table, Bertolini said. A centralized sewer system would bring the wastewater to the treatment facility in the south Cape, where it is treated and returned to customers as irrigation water.

Day suggested in lieu of the irrigation system, customers use their current system — well water — to irrigate lawns.

City officials have authorized preliminary design work on the area north and west of Pine Island Road, but stopped short of the final design. They say they will wait until an eight-member citizen panel comes back to them with recommendations.

## Assessment woes

When the city started installing utilities two decades ago, the leadership at the time decided to pay for the project by charging property owners an impact fee, which is now at \$6,700, due within six months of hooking up to the system and charging them an assessment fee, which rolls into the tax bill and can be spread out for several decades.

The assessment cost has fluctuated in the last seven years between \$12,000 and \$17,000 per the standard two-lot site. That assessment has risen steadily with the building supply market and, as the bids come in from contractors looking to work in Southwest 6-7 area, they appear to be sinking with the economy.

In other municipalities, utility installations were paid in part through a gas tax, or a special sales tax. While it may appear an attractive premise, Day said, for people in areas that have yet to receive the utilities, the thousands of customers who have already born the brunt of the cost with no help from special taxes would likely fight any plans to change the funding model now.

“That idea goes right down the toilet,” Day said.

The city in 2003 signed a contract with MWH Inc., an international construction firm that specializes in utility installations, to oversee the project.

MWH received the contract after the construction firm Kellogg Brown & Root was unable to obtain bonding for the project.

A more recent 2004 contract with MWH extends through 2011.

MWH screens and pre-approves construction companies. Those companies then bid on smaller project areas within the utility expansion areas.

Companies are now bidding on projects within the Southwest 6-7 district, an area east of Surfside Boulevard and south of Pine Island Road. The bids are coming in between 7 and 20 percent lower than the engineer’s estimate — a scenario that will likely lead to lower assessment costs.

It’s a fortunate scenario, Bertolini noted, at an unfortunate time.

“The best time to do it is when the market is low,” Bertolini said. “And that’s usually the time you don’t have the money to do it.”

## Environmental benefit

The utility expansion project, said MWH project manager Larry Laws, will take on added importance decades later as the state’s population grows beyond its water capacity.

The utility system now is designed around water conservation, Laws said. The utility project reclaims 97 percent of wastewater for irrigation, according to Cape Coral Public Works Director Chuck Pavlos.

“There’s no waste in Cape Coral’s wastewater,” Pavlos said, recalling a popular bragging point for those involved in the UEP.

The Cape now has two sewage treatment, or water reclamation, plants with a combined capacity of 15 million gallons per day. Expansion projects at both facilities could boost that total to 28 million gallons by 2009.

Another water reclamation facility in the north Cape, which is under construction, will add another 10 million gallons per day to the system, with the possibility of adding 20 million more in capacity down the road.

Jim Helton, a senior project manager with MWH, Thursday stood on a catwalk overlooking a torrent of brown water at the southwest water reclamation plant as he surveyed an army of construction workers spread out across the site.

“All of these facilities are future contemplated,” Helton said.

While the debates surrounding sewer expansion and its future, council members are in agreement that the city needs to provide water to its residents. Those not on the central system pull their water from private wells, which are typically between 100 and 200 feet below ground. Water closer to the surface is more pure and better for drinking.

But with so many homes drawing off the shallow wells, those wells have a tendency to dry up, Laws noted. Or when a well is emptied, brackish water further underground moves up, contaminating the wells.

The city's water treatment facility pulls the brackish water from plentiful reservoirs about 600 feet below the ground. The water is passed through special membranes that separate the fresh water from the brackish water. The waste from the process is injected back into the ground more than a half-mile below the surface.

The Cape's is the longest running reverse osmosis plant in the country, according to the Cape's water production superintendent Shawn Kopko.

The city's water treatment plant can process 18 million gallons of drinkable water per day.

A new plant under construction in the north Cape, near the sewage treatment plant, will be producing 12 million gallons per day of drinkable water by 2009. The plant is capable of producing an additional 24 million gallons down the road.

That capacity, Laws said, can accommodate any future commercial and industrial growth.

"You can't have growth without the utilities," Pavlos said.

But for Day, whose north Cape district is next on the list for expansions, state of the art utilities are useless without the people to use it.

"My main thing right now is not knocking people out of here," Day said.

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