

Impoverished area to get waterlines

West Wabasso residents live in stark contrast to the rest of the county's high quality of life.

By Henry A. Stephens
staff writer

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — West Wabasso residents Charles and Belinda McKenzie so badly wanted to see clear water flow from their faucets that they donated a 60-foot strip of land in August so the county could build a new road to extend and maintain new waterlines.

But 11 neighbors panned the idea, county officials said, forcing the county to plan the new waterline project, estimated to cost \$850,000, without an access road.

"We donated whatever was needed to get this," Belinda McKenzie, 47, recalled Tuesday. "I hoped everyone back here wanted good water."

McKenzie's neighbors couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday. She and county Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Renk were at a loss, meanwhile, to explain why others declined to donate right of way for a road into the 64th Court area.

"The others were so skeptical," Renk said. "It's that whole mistrust-of-government thing."

In a 5-0 vote Tuesday, the County Commission agreed to deed three 60-foot rights of way back to the McKenzies and their next-door neighbors, Stanley Hearren and Jean Helen Williams.

But 56 residents have donated the required 15-foot utility easements, allowing the waterlines to be buried, county Utility Services Director Erik Olson says.

With the money expected as a federal Community Development Block Grant and the rights of way not needed, Olson said in a report to the commission, "it appears that this most unique part of our community will soon be provided with water service at no cost to the property owners."

So the water will still come, Renk said.

"Oh, they'll get water. Absolutely," she said.

West Wabasso, north of County Road 510 and between 58th and 66th avenues, surprises many visitors with its stark contrast from the rest of the county's high quality of life.

The roads are not paved and, in some cases, aren't much more than paths meandering among the houses. There are no sidewalks or even county utilities. Wells yield brown water, forcing residents to buy bottled water from nearby stores.

"They have the worst water in Wabasso," Renk said. "It's horrible....The McKenzies were the ones who started this project. In our first (community) meeting, Charles McKenzie was the one who said, 'I'm ashamed to say I bathe in brown water.'"

The 2000 U.S. Census lists the population of ZIP Code 32970, which includes most of west Wabasso, as 115 with 99 blacks and 14 whites. The median household income is \$6,250 per year and the median home value at \$29,400.