

## West Wabasso finds success in long quest for county water

By HENRY A. STEPHENS

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — Residents of the economically disadvantaged West Wabasso community may finally get to drink and wash with clean county water from their own faucets by January, about 2 1/2 years after county officials first started seeking grants for it.

"I was hoping to get this for them in time for Christmas," county Environmental Engineer Himanshu Mehta said Friday. "But hurricane season starts in June and (a storm) is beyond our control."

Mehta is advertising for bids, starting Monday, to connect about 80 homes in the community to county water after years of residents drawing pale-brown-colored water from their wells.

West Wabasso resident James Taylor, 80, said he has lived for 30 years in the community and uses the brown water, similar in color to green tea, to wash his dishes. He said he'll be glad to get the water service, but won't celebrate until he sees it.

"They keep saying they're going to bring it, but they never get to it," he said.

West Wabasso, north of County Road 510 and between 61st Drive and 66th Avenue, surprises many visitors with its stark contrast from the rest of the county's high quality of life.

Some of the streets there are little more than paths meandering among the houses. There are no sidewalks. And the water from private wells, with 10 times the acceptable level of iron, has prompted some visitors to compare the neighborhood to the Third World.

Mehta originally estimated 120 lots in the project area. Each one would get a service line to the water main, he said. But only 79 would get meters. The rest are either undeveloped lots or vacant houses and would get empty boxes, he said.

Project consultant Fred Fox said his count on a recent visit came closer to 60 occupied homes.

Part of the problem, Fox said, is that some West Wabasso residents are still living elsewhere because their homes were destroyed by hurricanes Frances and Jeanne.

"So we have to determine when they are getting back," he said.

County Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Price and sheriff's Deputy Teddy Floyd, who have been working with residents for more than two years, said they would help the consultants locate residents who might have been overlooked or reluctant to answer their doors.

After bids are opened March 29, Mehta said, they would go to the County Commission to award a contract. If approved by the state Department of Community Affairs, Mehta said, he expects contractors to start laying water lines by mid-May.

Construction is expected to take eight months, putting the final connections in January — if the county avoids a hurricane, he said.

### West Wabasso bids

Purpose: Hook up West Wabasso, a long-neglected community, to county water.

Bid opening: March 29.

For details: Call county Environmental Engineer Himanshu Mehta at (772) 226-1822.

"Part of what delayed this is we needed to get approval from the DCA for the bid specifications before advertising for bids," he said. "We sent it to them in December and only got the approval Feb. 6."

County officials in June 2004 started seeking state funds and last spring secured a Community Development Block Grant for hurricane recovery. West Wabasso had water problems before the storms, but Fox said the 2004 hurricanes made them worse by flooding the ground and causing many old septic tanks to leach and pose danger to the shallow wells.

The \$825,000 block grant covers the construction plus charges of \$130 per customer to install a meter, Mehta said.

In addition, the County Commission in October advanced \$102,700 to cover fees for connecting meters to homes.

This leaves the customer paying \$75, he said, including a \$50 deposit and a \$25 service-application fee.

"Everyone has to pay that \$50, but they get it back after a year of paying their bills," Price said.

Mehta and Fox chose a July 1 deadline for potential customers to occupy any vacant dwellings. After the project, they said, a resident moving to a newly connected site would have to pay the county's full \$1,505 charge for water connection, meter, deposit and service application.