

West Wabasso's long road to county water about to end

Department is planning to extend public water service to 79 homes in a largely lower-income portion of West Wabasso. The project area is north of County 510 and east of 64th Avenue.

When James Taylor, 88, walks a block to the Church of God, he has a thirst for more than faith.

He carries empty jugs.

At the church Taylor fills up on clear water, as do about 10 other families — largely elderly, lower income people. They are part of one of the county's last vestiges of what once was more common: households supplied by private shallow wells pumping up water yellowed by naturally occurring iron in the soil.

Most other areas have hooked up to public water systems supplying purified chlorinated water. Since the late 1970s, the Indian River County Utility Department has set up central water treatment systems supplying a large part of the county's residents, including Sebastian's, living outside the city of Vero Beach. The city of Vero Beach has its own water system that includes town of Indian River Shores. Fellsmere also has its own water system.

West Wabasso was a noticeable exception: existing as a small lower-income residential enclave, largely left to itself — with water containing unusually high levels of iron.

In the late 1990s, the county answered the residents concerns about water quality by extending county water lines to a portion of West Wabasso, including the Church of God. Now the Indian River County Utility Department is planning to finish the job.

On Wednesday, one of three construction bids came in under the county's \$636,000 estimate for extension of water lines into the western part of West Wabasso. An Indiantown company, Sheltra & Sons Construction Co., submitted the low bid of \$575,000.

"This is great," said Utility Department official Mehta Himanshu.

All together, the county has an \$825,000 grant for the project. The balance of the grant is for paying the county water connection fees residents can't afford, county officials said.

"Incomes out there are so low," said Julianne Price, an Environmental Health Department official who has been assisting with the water line project.



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Julianne Price, right, Indian River County environmental health specialist, celebrated with Victor Hart, center, and other supporters of Wabasso's water project last October when the county agreed to pay the project's impact fees.



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James Taylor, 88, walks back to his home last week from the Church of God in Wabasso after filling up two jugs of water. He doesn't drink the water from his well because "it tastes like rust." The county is to consider bids opened Wednesday to finish extending water lines to West Wabasso.

The grant subsidies mean residents will only pay \$50 to hook up, versus paying the county's usual \$1,905 in connection fees.

The County Commission has to approve the bids before the work can begin. If approved, construction probably be done by February, Himanshu said.

Once the extension is done, about 95 percent of West Wabasso's 400 residents will be on public water. The remainder are mainly residents, in eastern West Wabasso, who haven't chosen to connect to a county water line, citing costs, county officials said. The line is along 58th Avenue.

"I wash and cook in the water" from a well, said Taylor a former Patrick Air Force base construction worker who has lived at his present home on 63rd Avenue for 30 years.

But, "I don't drink it," he said. "It tastes like rust" and he is apprehensive about the possibility of pollution from a neighbor's septic tank about 50 feet from his front yard well. His well is 60 feet deep.

County Environmental Health official Glenn Schuessler has been around for 25 years and West Wabasso "is one of a few places I have seen with iron content that high. It is really elevated and I'm not sure why."

Three miles to the west, is the expansive Vero Lakes Estates subdivision where residents also have private wells and septic tanks. That water also has some iron, but not at the levels found in West Wabasso.

Some West Wabasso water samples tested at 10 times the iron levels recommended by state and federal levels, Price said. "I do not know of health risks associated with this" outside of some residents complaining of skin irritations, Price said.

Testing did not show any harmful substances in high enough concentrations to warrant calling in the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Price said.

What most alarms Price, she said, is the closeness of the wells and "homemade failing septic systems," she said. That "poses the greatest health risk at this time:" the potential for sewer contamination of shallow wells.

Extension of the water lines "will better the lives of the residents," said Eugene Douglas, president of the Progressive Civic League of West Wabasso. He used to live in West Wabasso. Now he resides in the Sebastian Highlands.

"They won't have to worry," Douglas said. "When they bathe, they can feel cleaner" and white sheets won't yellow. "They can save on chlorine and laundry detergent" by using cleaner water.

Why: Poor water quality in private wells. And the possibility of sewer pollution.

Cost to residents: \$50, compared to the usual \$1,905 in county connection fees.

Proposed project cost: \$825,000.

Construction bids: Sheltra & Sons Construction Co., Indiantown, \$575,000; Maxwell Contracting Inc., Cocoa, \$693,000; and RIC-Man International, Pompano Beach, \$698,895.

Financing: The project is paid for by federally funded grants from the Florida Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery Project and from the Hurricane Housing Recovery Program.

Timetable: Construction bids for the work have to be approved by the County Commission in the next two months. Construction could take eight months.