

Can West Wabasso's pipes take pressure?

By HENRY A. STEPHENS

WEST WABASSO — Mary Jean McCray knows about the brown water that fills the shallow wells in this community.

It flows out of her tap.

But not into a drinking glass.

"It's horrible," she said Friday. "Even when you boil it, you can't drink it. We bathe in this water, but for drinking and cooking, we have to buy bottled water."

McCray spoke outside her 61st Drive home as plumbing subcontractor Leroy Wise and plumber Bruce Chandler, both from Okeechobee, tested her water pipes to see whether they could take the 64 pounds of pressure per square inch of the county's water system.

The County Commission in May launched the water project, using part of an \$825,000 federal block grant. Commissioners awarded a \$575,000 contract to Sheltra & Son Construction Co. Inc. of Indiantown, which recently finished laying more than 7,200 feet of water mains and installing eight fire hydrants in West Wabasso.

Wise is working on a \$69,000 subcontract to hook up to more than 50 homes, preferably by Christmas. Wise said he has to test the pipes and repair plumbing problems, if necessary, before he can connect a home to the new county water mains.

And any connection only can be authorized after the water main passes state bacteria tests.

Wise's task is slow-going, he said. He calls residents in the evening to make appointments, but said many don't have telephones. So he has to knock on prospective clients' doors while he's in West Wabasso testing the pipes of people he has scheduled.

"This water is going to be a blessing," said McCray, 67. "This will be a very good Christmas."

After moving into her home three years ago, she said, she tried to get the county to hook her home to water. But utilities officials quoted her a price of \$1,500 for an impact fee, in addition to about \$900 to extend a line to the nearest water main on County Road 510.

"I just couldn't afford that," she said.

The county's grant makes the extension of a line to the water main free for McCray and others.

All they would be required to pay is the \$50 connection charge and the water bill, which would be \$11.25 a month for \$1,000 gallons.

The county project doesn't include grant-funded sewer connections. Officials have deemed the heftier bills for sewer too much for West Wabasso pocketbooks.

So far, McCray said, she has paid about \$50 to \$60 a month for bottled water for her household of four.

And she will need that bottled water for a few more weeks at least. Her pipes didn't pass Friday's test, Wise said.

The tank on Wise's guest room's toilet couldn't hold water, Wise said, and kept running into the bowl.

"But I have to repair the entire system," Wise said. "That means pulling the toilet out of the floor and replacing all the fittings."

That means Wise will be back with parts, he said.

About six other homes require plumbing repairs before they can accept county water, he said. And they will be funded by the grant, too.

For 61st Drive neighbor John W. Johnson, however, Friday's test was a success. Wise and Chandler said his pipes held the 64-pound pressure.

Johnson, 64, said he had a water softener installed in the 1970s soon after he built the house. But that takes four bags of salt every three months, at \$7 a bag, to keep the softener working, he said.

He echoed McCray's feeling of the county water project as a blessing.

"The water is now (supposed to be) drinkable" out of the softener, he said. "But I don't want to take a chance."

He said he and his wife buy bottled water and keep it stocked.