

Water for West Wabasso pushed to new year

By HENRY A. STEPHENS

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — County officials say West Wabasso residents may not find clean water hookups by Christmas, but are looking toward early in the new year.

"We're close, very close," county utilities engineer Himanshu Mehta, the project manager, said this week.

The project is delayed from its Christmas target because the state has yet to approve the new water mains and residents have yet to pay their \$50 hookup fees, county officials say.

The delay wasn't so great a letdown for Sylvester McIntosh, vice president of the West Wabasso Progressive Civic League.

WATERING WABASSO

Project: Connecting 50 West Wabasso residents to new county water mains, relieving them of their brown well water.

Status: Okeechobee plumbing contractor Leroy Wise is expected to start Tuesday installing meters.

"Originally, they said January," he said. "Then they started saying they'd get done earlier, so we figure some time in January."

He said he has gone door-to-door distributing application forms for the program, but said it's up to the prospective customers to file the forms and pay the fee with the county.

Meanwhile, Mehta met Friday morning with Okeechobee plumbing subcontractor Leroy Wise on 64th Avenue, where the county has an existing water main.

There Wise said he got about 20 water meters from the main contractor, Sheltra & Son Construction Co. Inc. of Indiantown. They are the first part of a project to hook up about 50 homes to county water.

"We took down the addresses and assigned each one a meter," Wise said. "There were some issues we had to work out. One man owned five properties, but we only had two of them on our list."

He said he worked with Mehta, Sheltra representatives and sheriff's Deputy Teddy Floyd to get meters for all five of the properties.

Much of West Wabasso is an economically-challenged area where private wells yield brown water and the residents are forced to buy bottled water.

In fact, county Health Department records show the water from those wells in West Wabasso has 10 times the acceptable level of iron.

After years of complaints, the County Commission in May contracted with Sheltra at \$575,000 — using part of a federal grant — to lay 7,200 feet of water mains and install eight fire hydrants in West Wabasso.

And now, Mehta said, he still is waiting for the state Department of Environmental Protection to clear the new water mains as being free of harmful bacteria.

Mehta said he submitted his samples on Dec. 11 and has heard nothing back from the state since then. He said the holiday target, closing in, prompted him Thursday to seek answers from the DEP.

"The 14 days for clearances, is it 14 business days or 14 calendar days?" he asked in an e-mail late Thursday afternoon to the state.

"I am working on a grant water project to serve 49 properties in an area that was devastated with the 2004 hurricanes," he added. "We are finally close to getting the folks water and everyone is anxious to have it for the holidays."

Meanwhile, Wise said he plans to start Tuesday installing meters and connecting them to the water lines. But until the DEP gives clearance and residents pay the \$50 hookup fees, that doesn't mean anyone can take a drink yet.

"We're not allowed to go ahead and connect particular homes yet," he said. "All we can do is lay the lines from the street to the meters."