

Wabasso water hook-ups ready

By HENRY A. STEPHENS

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — State environmental officials have certified West Wabasso's new water mains as free of harmful bacteria, clearing the way for county contractors to hook 50 homes to county water after years of brown-colored well water.

"I'm going to jump for joy" when the county water comes through, 64th Avenue resident Julius Harris said Tuesday.

Harris, 59, who has spent most of his life in West Wabasso, said he has had to deal with "terrible" well water at his home for 18 years.

And that meant buying bottled water from elsewhere, he said. Many of his neighbors in the economically challenged area have had to do the same.

County Health Department records show the water from private wells in West Wabasso has 10 times the acceptable level of iron.

After years of complaints, the County Commission in May contracted with Sheltra & Son Construction Co. of Indiantown 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.

Okeechobee plumbing contractor Leroy Wise has been testing homes' plumbing systems and connecting meters in recent weeks, but so far hasn't had the state's go-ahead to hook up the residents.

The state's approval came Thursday in an e-mail from Cary Padello, an engineer with the state Department of Environmental Protection, to Himanshu Mehta, the county's project engineer.

Although the DEP has certified the water mains, it's the county's job to maintain the quality of the water reaching the homes, Padell wrote.

And now it's largely up to individual residents to pay the county's \$50 deposit and apply for hookups, Mehta said.

Mehta said Sheltra is expected to finish the project in coming months. And once the contractor is paid off, he said, it would be too late for anyone to hook up with just the \$50 deposit. Records show the county normally charges \$400 for a 5/8-inch water meter.

So the county is trying to get all 50 people signed up, Mehta said. So far about 10 people have paid the \$50.

But for Harris, the project has cost double that. He said he stopped by the County Administration Building last week to pay his \$50 and ended up being charged \$105.

- Okeechobee plumbing contractor Leroy Wise completes about 50 "trenches," or lines between new West Wabasso water meters and homes.
- Each resident submits \$50 deposit and applies for water to county Utilities Department.
- People yet to pay can do so locally when the West Wabasso Progressive Civic League meets at 6 p.m. Monday at the Dasie Hope Center, 8465 62nd Ave., Wabasso. Once the contractor is paid off, the grant project is over and prices go back to normal.
- At each connection, county sends more than 100 gallons of new county water into homes' water systems, flushing out the existing iron-rich well water.
- Okeechobee contractor Leroy Wise; Indian River County utilities engineer Himanshu Mehta

"They (utility staffers) charged me the \$50 plus \$25 and then sent me to the Building (Division), where they charged me \$30," Harris said. "That wasn't right. It was supposed to be just \$50."

And it will be, Mehta said.

"It's just a very new project, and we're all trying to figure things out," he said.

The county's grant is supposed to cover the \$25 hookup fee and the \$30 plumbing permit fee, he said. But not everyone on the county staff was aware of that, he said.

"Somewhere there has not been the proper communication," county Building Official Buddy Akins said. "Somebody needs to pony up the \$30."

Akins said his office is required to inspect new plumbing systems and must charge the \$30 inspection fee — whether that comes from the homeowner or a grant.

Mehta said the grant-funded West Wabasso water project is the first of its kind for the county. The Utilities Department will refund Harris' \$25 hookup fee and recoup it from grant money. He said he will contact the county's grant administrator, David Fox of St. Augustine, about the best way to use the grant to reimburse the Building Division's \$30 fee.