

Water system on its way to Wabasso

State says it will provide more than \$700,000 for western community

By Henry A. Stephens
staff writer

WABASSO — Residents of the economically challenged and hurricane-punched western Wabasso soon may be able to drink clear water — without having to buy it in bottles.

"We're excited," the Rev. Sylvester McIntosh said Thursday. "It's long overdue. We've been fighting for it a number of years. But we do thank the Lord for it."

Officials with the state Department of Community Affairs have assured county officials verbally that they will receive \$702,000 in a Community Development Block Grant to extend county water lines into western Wabasso.

"But we don't have it in writing yet," county Long Range Planning Chief Sasan Rohani said.

He said he would know for sure once the Legislature adjourns its 2005 session early next month.

County officials are scheduled to discuss the project in greater detail when the West Wabasso Progressive Civic League meets at 6 p.m. Monday at St. Matthew's Baptist Church, 8550 64th Ave.

West Wabasso, north of County Road 510 and between 58th and 66th avenues, surprises many visitors with its stark contrast from the rest of the county's high quality of life.

The roads are not paved and don't follow grids, meandering among the houses. There are no sidewalks or even county utilities.

The 2000 U.S. Census lists the population of ZIP Code 32970, which includes most of west Wabasso, as 115 with 99 blacks and 14 whites. The median household income is \$6,250 per year and the median home value at \$29,400.

Residents say their community goes beyond that ZIP Code. As an unincorporated area, however, there aren't any precise boundaries.

The community was established in the late 1800s, county Environmental Engineer Himanshu Mehta wrote last month in the grant request.

The residents mostly were Florida East Coast Railway workers or citrus grove workers.

"Today, the original grove-worker housing stands as a tract of dilapidated houses," Mehta wrote.

September's hurricanes added to the ravages of time and neglect, he wrote, reducing the community to "a virtual Third World country" with severe floods that mixed with the substandard septic tanks and contaminated the shallow wells.

Mehta originally asked for \$825,000 as the total cost to extend county water lines to 120 homes as part of an overall \$9 million disaster-relief grant request to include other areas.

Rohani said the state offered the maximum \$9 million to the county. When Fellsmere requested \$1.5 million for its own storm repairs, Rohani said, the county scaled its request back to \$7.5 million — which cut the Wabasso item to \$702,000.

County Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Renk, who has worked on the project for about a year, hailed the news as an example of community leaders working together.

While the substandard water predates the hurricanes, Rohani said, the disaster-relief grant can be used for water lines because hurricane-toppled homes need to be replaced at current regulations.

And that means county water connections, he said.

County Administrator Joe Baird said the county would make up the difference to provide the full project for the community.

"We think it's a good project," Baird said. "This was needed badly."