

West Wabasso to get county water

Residents will no longer have to rely on their own wells, which offer water of questionable safety.

By Henry A. Stephens
staff writer

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — Bruce McIntosh, a resident of 85th Street in West Wabasso, likes his water bottled.

It's not as if he has a choice when his own shallow well yields iron-rich water the color of green tea, he says.

"I buy water from my church," McIntosh, 83, said Tuesday. "I have for over 20 years. I've had four wells dug in my yard, and every time one turns brown, I buy bottled water."

McIntosh, who has lived in West Wabasso since 1952, said he looks forward to the day when he can open his own tap and pour his first clean, clear glass of county water.

And that won't be too long now for him and his almost 80 neighbors, county utilities officials say as they prepare to advertise the project for bids.

"We're ready," county Utility Services Director Erik Olson said Thursday. "We've finally got all the money and the permit for the project."

West Wabasso, an impoverished area north of County Road 510 and between 61st Drive and 66th Avenue, surprises many visitors with its stark contrast from the rest of the county's high quality of life.

"When you pass by on 510, you don't even know that area exists," said Olson's secretary, Joyce Daugherty.

Some of the roads are little more than paths meandering among the houses. There are no sidewalks. And the water from private wells, with 10 times the acceptable level of iron, has prompted some visitors to compare the neighborhood to the Third World.

The county already has a water main along C.R. 510. The West Wabasso project calls for extending lines north on 64th Avenue and off from there to individual homes, county Environmental Engineer Himanshu Mehta said.

Now, after more than a year working with state officials, they said, it's time for residents to celebrate how far they have come.

Local engineering contractors have chipped in for a free barbecue, enough to feed 150 people, at 1 p.m. Sunday at St. Matthew's Baptist Church on 64th Avenue.

"This will be a groundbreaking, a project kickoff," Olson said.

In addition to the dinner, he said, residents can sign one-time access permits so county contractors will be able to enter their yards and connect waterlines to their homes.

The state recently issued the county a Community Development Block Grant of \$825,000 to install the waterlines as a hurricane-recovery project.

And in a 5-0 vote Tuesday, the County Commission agreed to advance \$102,700 to Olson's department for West Wabasso water-connection impact fees. Olson said he would reimburse the county coffers with as much as he could from forthcoming grants.

Olson credited Mehta, county Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Renk and sheriff's Deputy Teddy Floyd with steering the project to the brink of reality.

"It's more than just giving the people water," Renk said. "This is finally treating them fairly."