

# Matecumbe Neighbors

## Email Mini Edition



Newsletter of the Lower Matecumbe Key Association

April 2010

### Onsite Wastewater Possibilities For Islamorada

By Sue Miller

On April 19, the Lower Matecumbe Key Association had a meeting with an important program on onsite personal wastewater systems. I was not able to attend so I asked several people who were there to provide their own thoughts on the meeting.

First let me summarize what the two speakers had to say about personal onsite systems, based on explanations from Gordon Hadley, LMKA president, and Martin Moe, a Lower Matecumbe resident with an extensive scientific background and member of the village water quality committee.

Speakers were Bill Brookman from the Florida Department of Health, providing information about state requirements and laws, and Daryle Osborn, a local engineer with Keys Engineering Service who has provided the design work for numerous onsite systems already installed in Islamorada.

The new onsite systems being installed today are not like the old septic tanks many homes in the Keys have used since about 1960. There are several components that must be installed. The onsite systems discussed at the meeting are specially engineered for specific sites and most (the FAST systems) use a twin tank, in ground septic system, an anaerobic and aerobic treatment, use pumping and aeration, and utilize one of three methods to dispose of the effluent. A 90qwell, encased to 60q a specially built up drain field with 12 inches of sand below about 12 inches of pea rock; or a specially designed and installed landscape drip system.

It is estimated that the total cost of the installation, depending on many variables, would be \$16,000 to \$19,000. While the engineered systems currently meet 2010 standards or come very close, it is anticipated that removal of fecal coliform, enterococci, other bacteria, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, endocrine disrupters, and numerous other components in the effluent may soon be the object of additional legislation and regulation which would impact all systems, central or onsite, greatly increasing costs.

The new onsite systems also have to be inspected and serviced. It is expected that the annual maintenance contract could cost as much as \$225/year. In addition, electrical service that may cost another \$20-\$25/month is required. The filtration system's component that removes phosphate, a brick or calcium based gravel, must have costly maintenance every few years as well.

One of the concerns about onsite systems has been the space required on the homeowner's property. It is estimated that the minimum space needed would be approximately 8x10 plus the size of the drain field that is used for disposal. It was not clear if a cistern (or your old septic tank) could be used as a holding tank for a drip irrigation system that could be used for disposal, instead of a drain field.

Currently the Florida legislature is considering a bill which would extend the deadline for reaching the 2010 standards for wastewater treatment in the Florida Keys to December 31, 2015. The bill will also transfer the responsibility for upgrades from individual property owners to the local government. And require central systems.

See page 2 for comments about the LMKA onsite wastewater meeting from some of the people who attended. On page 3 you will find an editorialized summary of where we stand now.

## Reaction to the Personal Onsite Wastewater Discussion

### **Gordon Hadley, President of Lower Matecumbe Key Association:**

Home system are not without their faults. They could be cheaper to install and maintain. They would prevent the years of torn up roads. Drip systems could be utilized. If the village/state allowed them and a fair way to pay out any grants were established, yes I would use one, but it would have to be done island-wide. Major roadblocks for central system is money and competency. Major roadblocks for home onsite systems -the village and the state.

### **Martin Moe, member LMKA, member of Islamorada water quality committee, scientist:**

These systems, I think, are OK under special conditions and circumstances, but I certainly don't think that they are suitable or desirable for most, almost all, homes in Islamorada. I would not want one.

In looking at what is possible and available, for Lower Matecumbe in particular, what makes the most sense to me is a STEP system. They have lower cost, much less construction hassle, and relatively little O & M for home owners, no or little absentee problems, and no effluent into the immediate environment. I plan to look at this in greater depth soon. (Note: basically, a STEP system would utilize the existing septic system for initial treatment and then pipe liquid effluent from septic to treatment plant, instead of using the drain field)

### **Michael McLoad, member of LMKA, new member of Islamorada water quality committee:**

We cannot trust the Village to competently execute any sewer plan...i.e. NPK. The Village has no plan. They are trying to ram a "non-plan" and assessments down our throats. No grants - no plants !

The reality of the situation is as I see it: The extension that Tallahassee is likely to pass will include that a govt agency...the Village...will get the responsibility and authority to develop and execute a plan for central sewers. While I truly believe that onsite systems are a great alternative, EVERYONE is going to have to do it....we cannot have a little of this and some of that. The engineer at the meeting suggested a pretty high price tag for onsite systems. Too many residents are just not following the situation...apathy. I am not sure that shipping wastewater to KL is a viable option...especially from LMK when you consider having to run pipes on bridges and well below dredging depth on the Snake Creek drawbridge.

### **Ron Winget, Board member of LMKA and member of Islamorada water quality committee:**

- *Upgrade or hook up to a centralized system?* Hook up to a central system.
- *Why?* Cost and convenience. Logic and reason. It's a no-brainer.
- *What do you think are the major roadblocks for central?* There's only one => Politics. I heard Michael McLoad say at the meeting that he would pay anything (in effect, admitting that on-site systems cost more) to keep local government off of his property. To him and a lot of our homeowners the issue is entirely political. It's not about cost and convenience its about winning the fight.
- *What do you think are the major road blocks for personal onsite?* High cost, high maintenance, low quality, inconvenience, smell, and reduction in property value.

### **Sally Eaton, member LMKA, organized effort to prevent placement of regional treatment plant on environmentally sensitive tract on Lower Matecumbe:**

There is no doubt that we would install an onsite system if we are allowed. It was noted that one could employ an existing cistern (I wonder about a cleaned out septic tank) to hold the reuse water for irrigation which makes a lot of sense. The systems make particular sense for Lower Matecumbe to avoid crossing bridges and digging up the highway. As one participant said--We don't want government in our backyard. Finally, the flexibility of the systems to meet a wide variety of situations from single family to multi unit is encouraging. Everything of course depends on what happens with the new legislation and whether they change from individual responsibility to village government being responsible. Moan!

### **George Young, member of LMKA Board:**

I was very impressed with the LMKA meeting. Great presentations from both "experts" including pluses and minuses. I will certainly continue my interest in an on site system and have already used the worksheet to determine my "flow". My biggest concern lies with SB1080--if we use an onsite system will Islamorada later force us to hook up to a central system? SB1080 does offer financial hope through bonding--if they can be made attractive enough to attract bond buyers.

### **Dr. Stan Margulies, Plantation Key resident, local activist:**

I'm not a resident of LMK but from what I now know, I think a central system done and funded properly is the way to go. Also, privatization must be seriously considered. (Note: *privatization means contracting out the design, construction and operation of the entire wastewater project to a qualified private company through a competitive bid process*)

### **Gary and Barbara Pensell, LMKA members**

Gary and I were at the meeting and frankly, wondered why it was even being brought up since it really isn't an option at this point. I think that a central system is by far the best choice. I look around at my empty neighborhood and see absent owners, rental properties, seasonal tenants, weekend warriors....not to mention a number of "old and decrepit"--All of which would NOT be responsible or willing or able to maintain their own systems. Leaving the town with monitoring and regulating all of these individual efforts or lack thereof would be impossible and a nightmare.

## Lower Matecumbe's Hidden Jewel



Many members voiced appreciation for Mary Ann Sturken's story about the Parmalee Estate. Thank you to Allen and Suzy Sankpill, LMKA members and owners of the property, for allowing us to highlight their island home in our last newsletter. Thanks also to Mary Ann and her husband Craig for touring the property and providing a special view of the property.

Watch for more special feature stories by Mary Ann in future newsletters. If you have ideas for stories or are willing to write articles for the newsletter, please let us know.

### The Wastewater Problem.... My Opinion

By Sue Miller

After attending the LMKA onsite system program, 8 property owners provided their comments about onsite wastewater systems. See page 2 for the wide range of opinions. When a government plans to spend tremendous amounts of taxpayers' money, building consensus makes the process go more smoothly. Clearly there is no consensus on Lower Matecumbe.

Village engineers have estimated the cost to central sewer the rest of Islamorada at \$132 million. Add \$30 million for North Plantation Key (NPK). \$160 million for a town the size of Islamorada is extraordinary, particularly when it is done during the worst of economic times, without the assurance of state and Federal grants. The price will amount to nearly \$20,000 per EDU. Because of the assessment methodology adopted by council, the price for single family homes is expected to be near \$27,000. The engineers are paid approximately \$80,000 per month to act as program managers. They have spent significant effort and money pursuing three different approaches in the last 18 months: island central systems, an Islamorada regional approach and now shipping our wastewater to Key Largo. Isn't it more efficient to make a plan first so 18 months of \$80,000 efforts lead to real results? Shouldn't the plan be decided after analyzing all the issues, identifying all problems? The village seems to look at one issue at a time, changing direction if a significant problem crops up.

Cost is uppermost to many yet the estimated costs for Islamorada are double the costs in Marathon (small neighborhood plants) and Key Largo (single regional plant). If all three areas get \$5000 per EDU in grant help, Islamorada homeowners are likely to pay four times what Marathon and Key Largo homeowners pay.

Next we hear of the importance of re-use. Why dispose of highly treated effluent when we are facing such significant water shortages? For \$132 million, we will be shipping our wastewater to Key Largo where it will be disposed of down an injection well, perhaps doing significant harm to the very marine environment we are trying to protect. Scientists seem unsure.

Are we being short-sighted to ignore future hurricane issues and disaster recovery concerns? For ten years our Comprehensive Plan prohibited crossing bridges with untreated wastewater. What if a bridge is wiped out? What if the single regional treatment plant is shut down during an evacuation? Or damaged during a storm? What is the back-up plan?

And there is the issue of trust. Without developing trust, the village will have a tough time building important consensus. The NPK system still has major design and construction flaws. Six years after initial construction, only half the property owners there are hooked up. Operational and maintenance costs are double what was expected. The wastewater assessments are extremely controversial... legally challenged by some; unfair or incorrect individual assessments appealed by hundreds.

Is it any wonder that so many property owners are anxious to learn more in hopes of finding a wastewater alternative that will provide better results? It may not be a question of what approach works best. It may be a question of who do you trust to do the job. The Village needs to finally fix NPK, repeal the flawed wastewater assessment and utilize a vastly improved methodology. And they need to develop a solid wastewater plan by considering all the obstacles and analyzing all the options. Only then will trust be possible.

# President's Corner

By Gordon Hadley

Spring has sprung and once again it's time to say good-bye to our friends and neighbors that spend the summer somewhere else.

It's also a great time to finally have our Keys home to ourselves. Most of the tourists are gone and the waters are flatter and warmer. All the lobster traps have been pulled and it feels like we can let our hair down and enjoy the care-free island lifestyle.

LMKA has had another great year. We had a political forum that did a lot to decide the new Village council. We had interesting guest speakers at our meetings-fish and wildlife experts, historians, insurance officials and wastewater professionals, to mention a few. The 9th annual Bike-path walk resulted in an extensive clean-up of the lobster trap area.

Your LMKA Board of Directors strives to enhance our island paradise, as well as, keep you informed of local issues. Please let a Board member know of any suggestions you might have to help make Lower Matecumbe Key even more wonderful than it already is.

We are currently looking for your input on improving the bike path. Making it safer, cleaner and more user friendly.

So to all our snowbird neighbors-we're looking forward to seeing you, once again, in the fall. And to all, have a safe and prosperous spring.

## Membership Application/Renewal

**First Name(s):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Last Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Mailing Address:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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## Lower Matecumbe Key Association Statement of Purpose

**The Lower Matecumbe Key Association, Inc. shall actively work to preserve and enhance the quality of life and environment through participation and democratic process by the residents.**

**Goals shall include:**

- 1. Monitoring activities such as zoning and construction.**
- 2. Communicating with all members to alert them to potential problems or opportunities.**
- 3. Coordinating the efforts of the individual neighborhood associations on common objectives.**
- 4. Providing an open forum for presentation and discussion of issues.**
- 5. Taking appropriate action on behalf of the membership.**

**Board of Directors:**

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Treasurer Ted Blackburn Secretary Claire Johnson**

**Board members: Ann Haber, Ron Winget, Dave Elbaum, Dick Wilson, George Young**

**Newsletter: Sue Miller, editor**

The opinions in this newsletter are not necessarily the opinions of the Board of Directors of LMKA.

Articles with opposing points of view are encouraged.