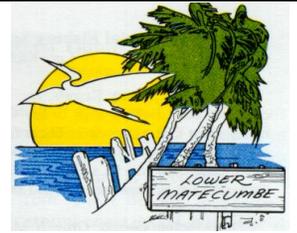


Matecumbe Neighbors



Newsletter of the Lower Matecumbe Key Association

August 2009

Critical Sewer Vote August 6

by Sue Miller

Many Islamorada taxpayers are up in arms over Village wastewater plans. Including the North Plantation Key wastewater system that is nearly complete, the cost estimated by village engineers to sewer all of Islamorada is \$157 million, a huge number for a town of 6300.

Wastewater upgrades are mandated by the state and the deadline is fast approaching. The state of Florida promised to pay 50% of the cost of sewers but because of grim economic times, they just don't have the money to help. Taxpayers may not have the money either. But the Village plans to proceed in spite of the turmoil it may create for taxpayers during horrific economic times.

Compare what other communities in the Keys are paying. In Marathon the total sewer cost per EDU is \$9,200. In Key Largo it is \$10,714. In Islamorada the projected cost is \$17,500 per EDU. (An EDU is a measurement of estimated wastewater volume for a single family home, an average of 157 gal per day in Islamorada)

With the help of grant funding and other sources, in Marathon, single family homes are paying \$5,730. In Key Largo, \$5,200. With the formula for distributing costs approved by Council, the cost per single family home and vacant lot could end up being over \$22,000 in Islamorada.

The \$157 million is a very preliminary estimate. Even with contracts in place, the North Plantation Key system had cost overruns of several million dollars, close to 10% of the initial contracted price and there are still design flaws that must be corrected.

In an effort to reduce the extraordinary costs, the Village is talking about changing the existing wastewater master plan which calls for central systems on each of four islands in the village and onsite systems for the upper end of Lower Matecumbe. Details and cost estimates for new options have not been provided. Council has approved no changes to the plan, though the EPA decentralized project for the upper end of Lower Matecumbe seems to have been abandoned along with the \$3.8 million grant that was to provide 75% of the cost. (page 6)

Under discussion is piping wastewater to Key Largo where there is already a regional treatment facility that could handle Islamorada wastewater, though the village staff appears to be adamantly opposed to this. Staff prefers the option of building two regional plants in Islamorada.

There has been no public debate, but the \$157 million cost estimate by village engineers, is based on staff preference: two regional treatment plants, expansion of the existing Plantation Key treatment plant and a new sewer plant at the Islamorada Tennis Club property at MM76.5.

Although many taxpayers insist that now is not the time to ask local residents and businesses to pay huge assessments, the decision is in the hands of five representatives on Council. On July 9 the Village Council gave initial approval for a controversial \$32 million wastewater assessment which may be included on the November 2009 tax bill. **A public hearing and final vote is scheduled for August 6. (Page 3)**

Hill Resigns from Council

Following the 3-2 vote on a \$32 million wastewater assessment on July 9, Councilwoman Cathi Hill, who voted with the majority, abruptly left the council meeting. The following day Hill resigned, saying she refuses "to yield to the endless ambiguity and vacillation by members of council whose indecisions are guided by personal and political gain."

The council has appointed respected long time activist Deb Gillis, local motel owner, to replace Hill. All council seats will be up for reelection next March.

Taxes, Taxes, and more Taxes

by Sue Miller

Budget meetings are in progress to determine local governments' budgets for the coming year.

Even though the Village Council has approved a decrease of at least \$650,000 in actual tax revenues, the tax rate (millage rate) is set to go up 10% to compensate for a 13% decrease in property values during the current real estate slump. The village staff has indicated this cut in tax revenues will significantly reduce village services. Hopefully government's efficiency can be improved instead.

School tax rates are projected to go up as much as 15.9%. County tax rates for countywide services are also expected to go up. Add assessments for solid waste and possibly wastewater! Hang on to your wallet. Everyone wants some of your money.

Homeowners with homestead exemptions should expect the most significant tax increases since the tax rate will go up significantly and the taxable value of homesteaded properties will also increase, as formulated by state Save our Homes law. Many properties without homestead exemptions should have significantly lower taxable value this year. Those property owners may see tax decreases, even though the tax rates will increase.

Budgets will be debated at public hearings between now and the end of September. The TRIM notices sent out in August provide taxpayers with their 2009 assessed valuation as well as projected taxes, based on preliminary tax rates. The August TRIM notice serves as an invitation to attend the remaining public hearings when budgets and tax rates are finalized.



Contact the Islamorada Village Council

If you have questions, ideas, or complaints you'd like to share with council, you can send an email to the Village Clerk at Beverly.Raddatz@islamorada.fl.us and ask her to distribute it to council.

Or send an email individual members: Don.Achenberg@islamorada.fl.us
Michael.Reckwerdt@islamorada.fl.us Dave.Boerner@islamorada.fl.us

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:

President Gordon Hadley: 305-664-0621; gordo0621@aol.com Vice Pres Donna Gleason
Treasurer Ted Blackburn Secretary Claire Johnson

Board members: Ann Haber, Ron Winget, Dave Elbaum, Pat Gaetjens, Gretel Duncan

Newsletter edited by: Sue Miller.

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.

Wastewater Assessment Vote Set For Aug 6

By Sue Miller

In 2005, the Council approved an assessment for the property owners on North Plantation Key who would be hooking up to a sewer system there. A formula was created to distribute costs based on the treatment plant cost that would be distributed by EDUs and the collection cost that would be distributed by connections.

The assessments on NPK resulted in significantly higher costs per EDU for single family homes and small businesses than the costs for condo units and larger commercial properties. Since last December, the council has had numerous workshops to come up with a more equitable methodology for village-wide owners. Council also decided to assess vacant lots to reduce costs to all other property owners.

It may be premature to determine cost distribution until more specific cost estimates are made after wastewater direction is finalized. The percentages for treatment and collection could vary greatly depending on whether we decide on the Key Largo Option, Islamorada regional plants or 4 island plants.

On July 9, the Village Council meeting agenda included what was to be the end result of the effort to create a fair and equitable wastewater assessment methodology. The assessment plan in the agenda called for an assessment to provide \$74 million for sewerage. Another \$58 million would be borrowed and paid back with debt service costs added to the monthly Operation and Maintenance bills once the system is complete.

Taxpayers were shocked at the numbers and showed up in force on July 9 to protest, many arguing that the assessment would drive property owners out of Islamorada and destroy many businesses. The council wanted to soften the impact and decided to reduce the amount of the assessment. And then confusion began. In the middle of the highly contentious meeting, the council passed an Initial Assessment Resolution, reducing the amount to be assessed so that it would be the same as what NPK homeowners were assessed in 2005. According to the resolution passed, the total assessment was reduced from \$74 million to \$32 million, still a huge number with the community struggling to survive economic tough times.

The refinements to the NPK methodology that the council worked on diligently for six months remained in place in the resolution passed by council as signed by the mayor, the clerk and the village attorney. The formula used in the calculations for the recent assessment letters sent to property owners eliminated some of the refinements approved by council. Oddly the assessment letter for village-wide property owners used calculations that maintained the percentages of treatment and collection costs that existed for NPK instead of the village-wide percentages. As a result, the inequities the council worked to correct are even more exaggerated in the assessment letters.

- Are we ready for such a huge assessment, without an approved plan and without promised state help?
- Where's the equitable distribution of costs council worked to figure out?
 - Single family owners will pay over 5 times what condo units pay according to assessment letters
 - Small single EDU commercial properties will pay multiple times per EDU what big businesses pay.
 - Vac lots are being assessed for the first time ... the same as single family (5 times a condo unit) though they may have to wait many years to get a building permit before using the sewer.
- No mention in the letter to property owners that the assessment only generates a \$32 million "down payment," less than 1/4 of the estimated total needed to sewer all of Islamorada.
- Connection calculations in assessment letters for multi-EDU properties are flawed.
- # of connections for some multi-EDU properties won't be known until collection system is engineered.
- North Plantation Key property owners will pay for 4 years longer than the rest of the community yet those homeowners will receive a credit of only \$363 of the nearly \$1800 previously paid, and lose the benefit of grants and lower interest rate debt previously approved for them in 2005.

Regional Sewer Plant Planned for Lower Matecumbe

By Sue Miller

The Village staff has been negotiating an option agreement with the owner of the Islamorada Tennis Club at MM76.8 since March. The village manager, Ken Fields, has expressed interest in using the property as a site for a regional wastewater treatment plant. He'd like to see it used to treat approximately 900,000 gal of wastewater a day piped to the plant from Windley Key and Upper Matecumbe as well as Lower Matecumbe.

The option agreement will have to be approved by the Council. If the option price is higher than the appraised value, the purchase will have to be approved by 4 council members instead of a simple majority.

The tennis club property is approximately 25.6 acres with nearly 5 acres of tropical hardwood hammock and 19.3 acres of mangrove wetlands in addition to the 1.6 acres where the tennis courts are situated. There are many concerns regarding the use of the tennis club property as a regional plant. In fact, a regional treatment plant approach has not yet been publicly debated and approved by council to replace the four island approach in the Islamorada Wastewater Master Plan. The Comprehensive Plan would have to be changed to allow the crossing of bridges. If those changes are considered, why not consider shipping to Key Largo? They already have a regional plant and a \$5 million 3200' injection well.

So why this location? Village Manager Ken Fields, claims it is ideal, well priced and is buffered from residential properties. Because the tennis club provides cleared area, this purchase would avoid clearing hammock elsewhere, according to Fields.

The Islamorada Comprehensive Plan states that, when selecting sites for centralized facilities, the Village shall avoid locations that are environmentally sensitive parcels. This is one of the most environmentally sensitive parcels in the village. The tennis club property is part of the Lower Matecumbe Hammock and is on numerous acquisition lists as a high priority "essential" acquisition. There are many endangered plant, animal and bird species that reside on or within a few hundred feet of this tract... including manatee, North American crocodile, roseate spoonbill, bald eagle, white crowned pigeon and Eastern indigo snake.

Hurricane Ike, a category 2 hurricane, damaged nearly all wastewater plants in its way in Texas last fall, requiring a majority of coastal treatment plants to be completely rebuilt.

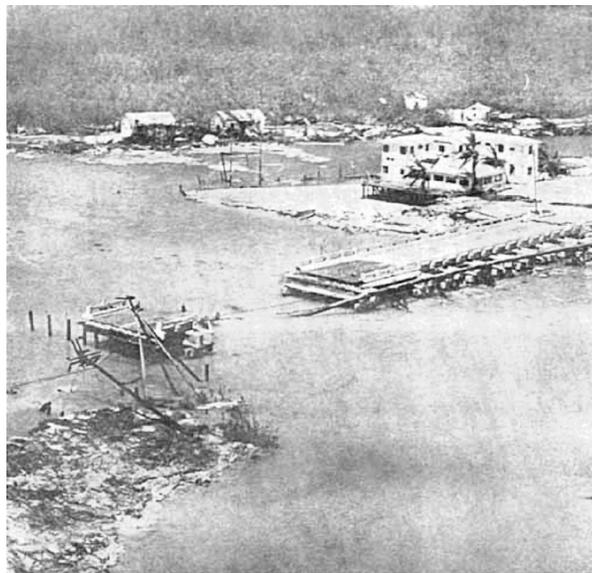
Should a regional plant be located four bridges and 2 miles of low-lying fill away from our business community? Consider the potential for costly damage that could shut down huge portions of the community after a storm. If a bridge is destroyed like in 1960, lack of vehicular access to Lower Matecumbe may further delay repairs. (see photo on page 5)

A major environmental concern is the disposal of the treated wastewater. Shallow injection wells (90' encased to 60') are legal if the plant capacity is under 1 million gal/day and this one would be just under that threshold, at 900,000 gal per day. But that is a huge amount of "fresh water" dumped into a fragile saltwater marine environment, at a single location, within hundreds of feet of critical wetlands, at a very narrow section of the island. A deep well (3200 feet) would add approximately \$5 million to the cost.

The Comp Plan states that re-use is to be implemented as part of the wastewater system. While a re-use storage tank is on the site plan for the regional plant, wastewater cost estimates do not include re-use. A re-use plan may be implemented in the future, but the engineers have indicated that the treated wastewater would only be available to customers on Lower Matecumbe. It would cost too much to ship the reclaimed water back across bridges to the bulk of the customers. With the drastic shortage of potable water in S. Florida, is it short-sighted to virtually eliminate the ability to re-use as much as 900,000 gal of reclaimed water per day?



Potential site of a sewer treatment plant at MM76.8 ... an environmental treasure and the location of the only clay tennis courts in Islamorada. Will they both be history?



Ev Fowler's and the Tea Table Relief Bridge, 1960

The bridge near Papa Joe's when Hurricane Donna hit in 1960 with storm surge between 8 and 13.5 feet.

Share your newsletter with neighbors.
 Invite them to join the Lower Matecumbe Key Association.
 A great investment at just \$20/year.

Membership Application/Renewal

First Name(s): _____ **Last Name:** _____

Mailing Address: _____

Local Address: _____

Phone (local): _____ **Other phone:** _____

Email: _____

Please provide your email address. Get your newsletter faster and save LMKA printing/postage costs! We only use the email address for LMKA correspondence.

Make check payable to
LMKA P. O. Box 911, Islamorada, FL 33036
Family \$20; Single \$12

President's Corner.....by Gordon Hadley

It's finally time! The inevitable has now become the evitable.

Last month the Village of Islamorada floated the idea to make LMK the wastewater capital of Islamorada. The plan is to build a regional wastewater plant on LMK, to accept not only LMK's wastewater but all the wastewater from Windley Key and Upper Matecumbe Key. LMKA has taken a stand against making LMK a regional wastewater site.

The village's plan is to purchase the tennis courts at mm76.8, and the adjoining land and build a wastewater treatment center that would be approximately 3 times as large as the wastewater site across from Coral Shores High School on Plantation Key. This plan also intends to cross as many as 5 bridges, to pump the wastewater south to LMK.

This seems to conflict with the long standing policy of not crossing any bridges to transmit wastewater.

If you are opposed to the proposed plan, let the Village council know your opinion. Please contact or email the Village council as soon as possible. This could be your only chance at protecting your home and investment. It appears that the people of LMK are the only ones that care about keeping our island the paradise we love.

Decentralized Wastewater Project Status

Several years ago the Village applied for and received a \$3.8 million grant from EPA to do a decentralized wastewater project from about MM76.2 north to the end of Lower Matecumbe. EPA's \$3.8 million would be 75% of the total projected cost of the project. A citizens committee was appointed to help facilitate the project. LMKA board member Ron Winget is the chairman of that village committee.

After meeting regularly since June of 2008, researching, and discussing the project, the committee voted to recommend to council that the project should be abandoned. Below is the report Chairman Winget gave to the council in June. For more information about the project and the efforts of the committee go to the committee website at www.lmkdww.org. The council has taken no action yet on the committee recommendation.

Committee Report to Council

By Ron Winget, Chairman of Steering Committee

Lower Matecumbe Key Decentralized WasteWater Steering Committee (LMKDWWSC) has recommended that the Village of Islamorada abandon the EPA Decentralized Wastewater Demonstration Project at the North end of Lower Matecumbe Key. The recommendation is the result of work by the committee over the past fifteen months as well as a survey of residents in the demonstration area.

The EPA project would require the use of small pod systems for each two to four residents in the demonstration area. This technology, while viable in an appropriate geographical/population matrix, is questionably appropriate for the population and geographic matrix of the north end of Lower Matecumbe, for the following reasons:

- Considerable testimony and evidence indicates that a central sewer system is more effective at pollutant reduction in wastewater effluent.
- Issues of necessary Village utility access to private residential properties present some un-resolvable barriers.
- Evidence was presented indicating the ongoing maintenance costs for multiple small pod systems would appear to exceed similar needs of a central system .
- A lack of financial incentive and a potential for property value reduction for the property owners in the affected EPA program area precluded any collective motivation to be a participant in this project.
- While considerable interest was found with the area's property owners for 'alternative' wastewater treatment concepts, few showed an interest in hosting the collective above-ground components of the proposed EPA systems.

The above findings were supported by a recent survey conducted of relevant area property owners. Twenty Six of one hundred ninety three property owners were successfully queried. Of those contacted, 42.3% (eleven respondents) expressed an opinion that the EPA Pod system might be a viable alternative for wastewater treatment. Despite this limited but significant opinion regarding pod system viability, of the twenty six respondents, 81% (21 respondents) preferred having a central sewer system as opposed to the pod system alternative should the individual property owner costs be the same for either system.