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Water hook-up costs skyrocket

By DOUG SWORD
doug.sword@heraldtribune.com

NOKOMIS -- The price to connect to county water keeps going up, but Nokomis residents feel they have little choice because of the worsening quality of their well water.

The county now estimates owners of 220 homes in the Shore Road neighborhood of Nokomis will have to pay \$8,500 each to hook up to county water. And that doesn't include a \$2,720 impact fee and the cost of a plumber.

The rising cost has county commissioners considering a program to subsidize poorer residents who can't afford the fee.

In the nearby Bay Point neighborhood another 495 homeowners will be hit with a \$5,200 hook-up fee.

The hook-up costs are more than double the \$2,500 county officials estimated they'd be in 2004.

Residents in the neighborhoods are upset, but they still want to hook up to central water through the county, said Chris Tritschler, who owns homes in both neighborhoods.

"We've gone from poor quality water to salt water," he said. For Tritschler, having clean water is far more important than price. "I don't care if it's \$8,500 or \$10,000."

There are people, particularly seniors on limited incomes, who might not be able to afford the increased cost, said Tritschler, so it's understandable that county commissioners are talking about setting up a program to help these families.

But Tritschler hopes that doesn't mean there will be delays. The county needs to move quickly, because water quality in the neighborhoods "is at a crisis level right now," he said.

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On Tuesday, commissioners decided to delay the Shore Road project 60 days and review the project part as part of a bigger study now under way.

That study will look at both county water and sewer utilities. It likely will center on the Phillippi Creek Septic System Replacement Program, which was originally estimated to cost \$121 million to hook up 15,000 homes to the county sewer system, but is now forecast to cost \$157 million.

In December, county utility officials said they would come back with recommendations, which could include a general rate increase, to soften the financial blow the rising costs would have on septic system owners. A public workshop on these issues, including the Shore Road project, will be held next month.

"There's this avalanche of misfortune that has fallen on these folks," Commissioner Jon Thaxton said of the Nokomis residents. The county should consider providing subsidies to poorer residents or otherwise using

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