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### Charlotte Commission approves paving programs

The Charlotte County Commission voted Tuesday to institute programs to pave roads and repair drainage systems in the Charlotte Ranchettes, Tropical Gulf Acres and Farabee Road in far eastern Charlotte County.

The decision likely won't be popular.

The program calls for property owners in those areas to pay assessments totaling some \$50 million over the next 20 years.

For some, annual assessments could range from several hundred to several thousand dollars per year.

The decision may end a vicious cycle, said Commissioner [Adam Cummings](#).

He explained that, for years, residents have complained about ill-maintained marl roads that frequently washed out during summer months due to inadequate or nonexistent drainage systems.

The county Public Works Department would respond by putting together plans to build the roads and establish drainage. But when the property owners learned of the costs, they'd react with vehement opposition, Cummings said.

"It's been an ongoing cycle," said Cummings, a commissioner for 12 years. "I think this is the third go-around for me. Now, we're going to make them go through with it."

The time has come to pave the roads and assess the property owners because the maintenance is consuming more than its share of Public Works' time, said Dawn Harrison, an assessment district representative for the county.

"We're trying to get out of the grading business," she said.

In Charlotte Ranchettes, which was developed on a former pineapple farm east of the airport, the commission decided to triple the amount of road paving recommended by Public Works. Instead of paving 11 miles, all of the subdivision's 35 miles will be paved. Two miles are already paved.

To ease the burden on property owners, the commission extended the time to pay off the costs to 20 years.

The county had estimated that paving 11 miles would have cost \$8.5 million, which would mean annual assessments of more than \$1,300 per acre over 10 years.

The county has yet to revise the assessments, Harrison said.

The county could encounter difficulties implementing the project that could drive up the paving costs, she said. Also, the county may encounter endangered species, which could require mitigation.

The county has established municipal services benefit units to fund maintenance of the roads and swales. But the \$100 per acre assessments for the Ranchettes weren't enough to do more than grade the roads once per year, Harrison said.

Tropical Gulf Acres, a larger subdivision south of Punta Gorda, faces similar challenges. It has 23 miles of grass roads, 11 miles of marl roads and 29 miles of paved roads.

Public Works envisions a \$27 million project to improve the development's roads and drainage.

The commission decided to extend the assessments to pay off the project in 20 years. That would reduce proposed annual assessments to \$435 per unit over 10 years.

However, the county also expects to encounter unforeseen environmental challenges that could drive up those costs.

Commissioner [Sara Devos](#) asked county staff to explore ways to adopt an impact fee for affordable housing and apply some of the revenues to offset the road-paving costs.

"Affordable housing is in real short supply and this is one of the few areas that is still affordable, and some of the folks out there can't afford this," Devos said.

Farabee Road, which serves orange groves, vegetable farms and a rock quarry in far eastern Charlotte County, should be paved because maintaining the road is too time consuming, Harrison said. She cited the 19-mile drive that Public Works crews must travel to service the road.

The commission approved assessing property owners \$9.89 per acre for 10 years to pay the \$1 million cost of paving Farabee Road.

The projects won't be officially adopted until after public hearings are held.

"The board has the authority to do the work and assess the property owners," Cummings said. "The question is whether (the commissioners) will have the desire."

In other matters, the commission voted unanimously to change the Alligator Creek Waterway Municipal Service Taxing Unit -- a special tax district created to help pay for maintenance of the waterway -- into a Municipal Service Benefit Unit.

As a taxing unit, revenue for canal maintenance was produced through property taxes, with a millage rate determined by dividing the cost of the annual required work by the taxable value of all properties within the unit.

As a benefit unit, that revenue will come from special assessments, and the cost of the annual work will be divided between the total number of residential lots within the district.


According to David Phelen, the district's board chairman, the change has been scrutinized in public hearings by residents throughout the special district, and there was overwhelming approval for the change.

"What you have out there now is a small handful of homeowners paying several hundred dollars a year for the rest, who are paying next to nothing," said Phelen. "This will reduce their bill substantially to about \$70 or under, which will be what they all pay."

-- Staff Writer Barry Millman contributed to this story.

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