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Connection cost shocks residents

Nokomis homeowners shocked as the cost of their new water hookup rises to at least \$6,100.

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STAFF WRITERS

NOKOMIS -- Shirley Tavormina is tired of the tank, filters, two pumps and water softeners she buys and maintains to care for her well and to rid the water of its sulphur smell.

Tavormina has endured the nuisances and work that go with owning a well since she and her husband, Sal, retired 25 years ago to Nokomis Gardens, a 25-home subdivision located a half-mile from the beach.

The 72-year-old has hoped for a decade to hook into Sarasota County's water lines.

But now she is not so sure. The cost is far more than she and 714 other Bay Point and Shore Road landowners expected.

Told about a year ago that the project would cost an estimated \$3,000 to \$4,000, residents were shocked recently to learn that the new cost is between \$6,100 and \$7,400.

Escalating construction costs and surging prices for labor, pipe, steel and concrete are to blame for the recent increases, according to county officials.

"The (newest) bids were developed at a time when one of the primary materials for the project, PVC pipe, is in limited supply and at a high cost, consistent with what we are currently experiencing with other petroleum-based products," said Judy LaMee, the county's environmental services communications manager.

But some residents are skeptical of the explanation.

"Sure, the price of materials has gone up, but you wouldn't think it would cost double," said John Greenwood, a homeowner on Lyons Bay Road.

Four years ago, Bay Point and Shore Road neighborhoods voted to create a special district to bring water into the area at a cost of between \$2.1 million and \$2.8 million.

But those projections rose recently to between \$4.3 million and \$5.3 million.

"These are not the prices we voted on," said an angry Ken Budd, a Nokomis resident.

Now they're stuck. The homeowners have to pay at least \$6,100 whether they want county water or not. If they do hook up, they have to pay a \$2,720 impact fee, plus pay a plumber to run lines from the county pipes to their home, which could run them another \$800. They'll

also get a monthly water bill.

Low- or fixed-income residents may find the price tag especially hard to swallow. The median income of the 3,334 residents is about \$35,000. About 13 percent of the population lives in poverty, about 5 percent higher than the county average, according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

"Personally, I am retired and on Social Security and I have a small pension," said Greenwood. "I can't afford it. I don't think most average people could."

But among the community's trailers and modest homes, there are also a sizable number of multi-million-dollar residences near the waterfront, making Nokomis a difficult community to put under a single label.

A Dec. 13 meeting of 83 homeowners at Nokomis Community Center didn't ease any of Bay Point or Shore Road residents' concerns.

The neighborhood session was supposed to update residents about the project's status. But Budd and other attendees felt they didn't know any more than they did a year ago.

"It wasn't an update," Budd commented. "It was 100 or so people mulling around trying to grab people to ask questions. There was no presentation, and no one said a word publicly."

"I don't think there was anyone at the meeting who was too happy," said Greenwood.

A similar water project is on tap for 1,600 parcels in east Nokomis. It's slated to cost \$5.4 million. Engineers, however, are reevaluating prices, which are likely to rise.

According to price indices from Engineering News-Record, a publication for the construction industry, prices on materials and labor are up over the last year, with the highest increase being a 13-percent jump in the price of steel. Construction costs were up 4.6 percent from 2004, while materials, including cement, steel and lumber, rose 6.4 percent.

"There's a lot of evidence that construction prices are going up," said Jay Brady, executive director of the Gulf Coast Builders Exchange. "And as the construction really gets under way on the upper Gulf Coast there's bound to be even more pressure on prices."

George MacFarlane, who oversees Sarasota County water and sewer business operations, noted that the earlier numbers were estimates and the new numbers are based on actual costs.

"We went out and got three bids," and that's what the \$6,100 hookup fee is based on, he said.

Financial assistance may be available to homeowners from the Sarasota County Office of Housing and Community Development.

Homeowners must be at or below 80 percent of the median income level. The value of their home, however, cannot exceed \$226,350. The OHCD program can help offset the impact

fee, plumbing fees and well abandonment costs, according to the program's pamphlet.

"It is a very positive improvement for the Bay Point neighborhood. The only problem is the uncertainty of the cost," said Ron Buston, a Nokomis resident. "We only hope there is not another surprise. That would upset an awful lot of people."
