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Cape Coral committee faced with important task

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The group includes a former mayor, a handful of engineers, project managers, an IT specialist and a professor. Together they have two-and-half centuries of professional experience.

They have offered to throw their free time at one of the most divisive issues in Cape Coral's recent history. The group of eight is tasked with dissecting the city's 18-year, \$1 billion-dollar utility expansion project, which began in 1999, and finding a better way forward if possible.

"The technical issues are extensive. The political issues are extensive. The financial issues are frightening," said committee member Jack Schrager. Schrader is a vice president with Avalon Engineering and has worked on civil engineering projects with the city since 1971, including some work on the utility expansion.

"Regardless of what this committee is able to come up with as recommendations, it's still going to be difficult for the city council to make a final decision on how they want to proceed," he said. "They have my sympathies."

The council last month selected the eight committee members from 14 applicants. Despite some disagreement over who made the cut, council members are holding out hope the committee can help clarify issues associated with delivering water, sewer and storm water utilities to residents across the Cape.

The committee, which met for the first time this week, has not set a time table for delivering recommendations.

"It's certainly a diversified committee," said District 4 council member Dolores Bertolini. "I do think they have a difficult task ahead of them. The challenge is the volume of information."

In an effort to give some directions, the council agreed to five issues for the committee to study:

- The assessment methodology
- Whether the current contracting program nets the best price
- The best design for sewers
- Whether to extend utilities in the north Cape, and if so, what utilities
- Best way to finance the utility expansion program

District 5 council member Eric Grill, who put the five directives together, said he feared the council couldn't wait for the committee to act before moving ahead with the latest phase of the utility expansion.

"My concern with this committee is there's not enough time," Grill said. "The market's down. It's time to get good prices."

The city is now accepting bids from contractors looking to expand utilities to the Southwest 6-7

assessment area. Many of the initial bids have come in 10 to 20 percent lower than expected, reflecting the slowdown in the building industry, which many believe is ratcheting up competition and forcing down prices.

Grill said the city needed to go forward with SW 6-7 and hustle to open bids in the North 2 assessment area north of Pine Island Road while the market is still down. Grill suggested the committee look at financing options in those areas.

But District 2 council member Pete Brandt said the committee needed to start by rethinking the shape of the expansion. The current plans call for a gravity system, which capitalizes on water's propensity to flow downhill in moving sewer waste. Brandt has suggested a sealed vacuum system as a cheaper option.

"They have to sort out some of the technical and fundamental questions first before the dollars and economics can be sorted out," Brandt said.

The city has paid for the expansions through special assessments. It's been the city's methodology since the 1980s, Schrader said. Under the system, the city spreads the cost of the installation among affected homeowners through special assessments. Those assessments are tacked onto tax bills and can be spread out over 20 years. Along with the assessment, residents have to pay a one-time \$6,750 impact fee and whatever a plumber charges to hook a house up to the utilities.

The assessments, which have fluctuated substantially, evoked the ire of Cape residents.

One of the committee members, John Sullivan, whose total bill in the Southwest 4 assessment area exceeded \$24,000, filed a lawsuit against the city challenging the assessment methodology. Bertolini questioned whether Sullivan's suit constituted a conflict of interest.

Sullivan has said he will donate any settlement from the suit, should he win, to the American Cancer Society.

"This was never meant to be a money making proposition," Sullivan told the council March 31. "It was and is a statement."

Despite Bertolini's protest, the council voted to keep Sullivan on the committee.

Bertolini this week said she was still confident in the committee's ability.

"Individually they all have talents," Bertolini said. "Together they should be able to do even more."
