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FEATURED

County takes multi-pronged approach to water quality

Septic tank removal, better wastewater treatment have big price tags

By BOB MUDGE Senior Writer

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Gulf Coast Community Foundation Senior Vice President for Community Jon Thaxton speaks about nonprofits in May at a banquet held by the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce. He was a part of a Monday webinar about water quality in Sarasota County.

FILE PHOTO BY SCOTT LAWSON

SARASOTA — Sarasota County presented a webinar update Monday on what it's doing to improve water quality.



The takeaway is, it's a lot.

"Some solutions are easy, some are hard." — Jennifer Shafer, on steps to improve local water quality

The 2021 Sarasota County Water Quality Virtual Update included speakers from numerous county departments as well as Jennifer Shafer, one of the authors of the Water Quality Playbook, a Gulf Coast Community Foundation project, and former County Commissioner Jon Thaxton, who chaired the Playbook committee.

Thaxton said that the red tide outbreaks of a few years ago were a "clarion call" that more needed to be done to improve local water quality or suffer the consequences.

As County Commissioner Christian Ziegler noted in opening remarks, the area's entire economy depends on its water quality.

"This is an issue everyone rallies together on and supports," he said.

Shafer said the playbook has three focuses: reducing the nutrients that end up in local waterways; removing the nutrients that are there now; and building capacity and resilience to be able to handle nutrients in the future.

It offers 43 activities intended to "organize, fund and motivate" water quality improvement efforts, she said.

"Some solutions are easy, some are hard," she said.

Dave Tomasko, the executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, said that the public's main interest in clean water is simple.

"People want to go out out in waist-deep water and see their feet," he said.



About 20,000 local jobs are affected by water quality, he said, and it creates a \$3 billion property value "uplift" for waterfront property — as long as the bay is healthy.

It's crucial for sea life as well, he said, noting that more manatees died in the first six months of this year than in any prior year, starved to death due to a die-off of sea grass in the Indian River Lagoon.

Sea grass has declined 22% in local waters since 2016, Tomasko said, but is showing signs of a rebound.

The county's implementation of advanced wastewater treatment and the continued removal of septic tanks have the potential to remove far more than the 12 tons of nutrients that have caused the sea grass decline, he said.

Sarasota County Utilities Director Mike Mylett said that more than 10,000 septic tanks have been removed in the Phillippi Creek program, and the County Commission recently gave the go-ahead for the Venice Gardens advance wastewater treatment facility.

Construction of that \$90 million project will probably begin in 2023, he said, with completion in 2026. Work on a similar facility in central county would begin then, he said.

Conversion of the Bee Ridge treatment facility, at a cost of \$215 million, is underway.

However, he said, there are another 24,000 septic tanks in the unincorporated parts of the county, and connecting all those properties to the sewer system could cost as much as \$1 billion.

The county's stormwater program has shifted its focus from flood control to water quality, Senior Manager Amanda Boone said, but it faces three challenges.



One, she said, is that landscaping outside of preserved areas is mostly in place already. A second is that the county's coastline was developed before stormwater treatment was required, and the third is that while the county owns the drainage system, 87% of the ponds that affect the estuary are in private hands.

Nearly 54% of pollution comes from direct runoff, she said.

Abby Tyrna, Water Management agent with UF/IFAS Extension and Sustainability, said that residents who want to do their part to improve water quality can take the lead in installing a Florida-friendly yard.

That means "the right plant in the right place," she said, reducing the need for fertilizer, watering and pest control, all of which contribute to the nutrients that end up in local waterways.

