

Sarasota County launches major expansion of Bee Ridge wastewater facility

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At a facility in eastern Sarasota County, wastewater swirls around in 180-foot-long tanks perched on top of a plain, white building.

Desirable bacteria consume the waste and organic materials, cleaning the water.

This is one of the first steps in the wastewater treatment process at Sarasota County's Bee Ridge Water Reclamation Facility – a plant that's about to undergo a major expansion.

The facility, which produces reclaimed water for northern unincorporated Sarasota County, is going to be converted into an advanced wastewater treatment facility. This will make it more effective at removing harmful nutrients – including nitrogen and phosphorus – from wastewater.

Background: Over \$500M in utility improvements are coming to Sarasota County

More: Higher utility bills coming for Sarasota County

County officials broke ground in late March.

“The project is for everyone in our community and for future generations,” Commissioner Maio told those gathered for the groundbreaking.

The enhancements to the Bee Ridge facility are expected to cost \$210 million, about half of which will be paid for by a low-interest loan that the federal Environmental Protection Agency has awarded the county.

What's advanced wastewater treatment?

AWT refers to any process that reduces the level of impurities in wastewater below the level attainable through conventional treatment, according to the American Institute of Chemical Engineers.

The conventional treatment, which Sarasota County uses, leaves nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus in the water, said Mike Mylett, the county's public utilities director.



When residents use reclaimed water in their sprinkler systems, nutrients in the water can make their way into Sarasota Bay. A variety of other sources – such as fertilizer and power plant emissions – also contribute to nutrient pollution in the bay, according to the Gulf Coast Community Foundation's Community Playbook for Healthy Waterways.

Blue-green algae and *Karenia Brevis* – the algae responsible for red tide – feed on excess nutrients in the bay.

The conversion to AWT is one way to try to lighten nutrient pollution in Sarasota County. The Bee Ridge plant currently produces 16 to 18 mg of nitrogen per liter of reclaimed water, but the new facility will produce less than 3 mg per liter, according to Mylett.

At advanced wastewater treatment facilities, there is an additional step in the biological treatment process, which reduces the nutrient levels in the water, Mylett said.

What's the plan for construction?

Sarasota County is planning to expand and upgrade the current Bee Ridge facility, according to the EPA. Mylett said construction will start in the next couple of weeks, and he expects the project to be finished by mid-2025.



Consent order

In September 2019, Sarasota County entered into a consent order with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection after persistent pollution problems that had prompted environmental groups to sue the county.

Reclaimed water not sold for reuse is stored at a pond at the Bee Ridge facility, and the pond kept experiencing spills for several years. The pond has not overflowed in the past two years, though, Mylett said.

Under the consent order, Sarasota County has to implement advanced wastewater treatment at the Bee Ridge plant by Dec. 31, 2025.

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