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Utility angst has Cape Coral boiling

By Brian Liberatore bliberatore@news-press.com

The fallout from the city's utility expansions could turn Cape Coral's already tumultuous political environment hostile.

In the midst of the worst recession in city history, the council last Monday, June 8, voted to move ahead with its utility expansion program, which means thousands of dollars in fees and assessments to property owners. But the alternative meant jacking up utility rates, pushing the utility problem into the future and stymieing hope of growth in the city's north.

Politically, it's a no-win situation, according to Bert Swanson, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Florida.

"Clearly, you need sewers and water," Swanson said. "But maybe most people can't afford it. This is a double-barreled problem."

The chances of Cape's council members emerging from the June 8 utility vote with their political capital intact, Swanson said, are "slim to none."

Residents frustrated

The council was already fighting a perceived disconnect between residents and their government.

Seven out of eight residents don't think Cape Coral's government is listening to its people, according to a city-sponsored survey of residents released last week. That number has grown worse: In 2005, more than twice as many people said the government did a good or excellent job listening to the people.

"I think they do an excellent job of listening to people, they just don't pay attention to it," said Cape resident Robert Meyers.

Adding to the discontent was the council's decision to stop and start the utility program. Belief that the project had been canceled after a no vote prompted southwest Cape resident Scott Quorollo to spend money he had been saving for the utilities.

"I think they did a poor job in the handling of this project," Quorollo said.

According to the same survey, about two-thirds of people didn't think the city is headed in a good direction.

"People's impressions of government were already bad," said Councilman Tim Day, the longest-serving member on the Cape council. "They blame government for this banking crisis. They want to blame government because they lost their job. People are just not happy overall."

No easy choice

Utility expansions have polarized public opinion since they began two decades ago.

More than 60,000 residents this week will get letters in the mail explaining the expansions and the fees associated with them. Those living in the north Cape will have to pay an average \$6,000 in assessments and fees for city water. The 6,200 residents in the Southwest 6-7 Assessment Area will pay an average \$17,000 for water, sewer and irrigation lines.

The city has created financing options to ease the sting. People won't have to pay anything on the project, including the cost of hooking up their home's plumbing, for three years.

But the new financing options, which spread out payments or allow for deferment, may do little to dull the political impact.

"The entire makeup of the council will change in November and whoever is against restarting this project will be elected," Herman Fuchs wrote in an e-mail to the City Council. Fuchs lives in the southwest expansion area.

Five seats - including the mayor's - are up for election this November. The election could serve to gauge just where public opinion falls.

"I don't envy the difficult decisions that you were elected to make," Christopher O. Scott wrote in an e-mail to Mayor Jim Burch, "but (I) am confident that continuing with (utility expansion program) ensures that you are truly looking out for the health, safety and well being of your constituents and is the fiscally responsible course of action. I understand that the UEP appears to be an unpopular decision ... however, I am certain that there are many more who share my thoughts and sentiments."

Councilman Pete Brandt disagrees.

"Some on council are just not in tune with what the majority of the city is saying," Brandt said. "These five people (who voted for the utility expansions) just go right on ahead doing things and convince themselves what they're doing is the best for the city."

But Brandt has not yet put forward an alternative, aside from postponing the project two years and trying to find a less expensive approach to the expansions.

Mistakes of the past

The city, Day said, had no choice but to vote for the project last week.

Cape Coral is now finishing work on about \$460 million worth of facility expansions.

"The time to stop this was four years ago," Day said. "But once we built that water plant, the die was cast. Absent the ability to turn back time, you have all these bills, you have to do something. We have to move forward."

Cape Coral was born 40 years ago with no real consideration for public utilities, municipal buildings or non-residential property. Building the city on a checkerboard of pre-platted residential lots has proven difficult.

"How do you overcome the mistakes of the past?" Swanson said. "What you need is leadership that can explain the pros and cons. The leadership had to really explain why this thing is necessary."