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Wednesday, September 3, 2014

District claims funding unfair

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KEY LARGO -- The Key Largo Wastewater Treatment District says the county needs to fork over more funding to help it pay for its sewer system.

County officials, meanwhile, say Key Largo has gotten plenty of county money over the years and characterizes the district as "overfunded."

In the middle is public opinion.

Recently, the wastewater district allotted \$36,000 to hire a Key Largo public relations firm whose primary mission is to convince voters and county officials that homeowners in unincorporated Key Largo are paying much more for sewer service than their counterparts in the Lower Keys due primarily to a disproportionate divvying of county infrastructure sales tax revenue.

Key Largo's \$154.5 million system has received \$28.2 million in county funds, while the \$161 million Cudjoe Regional System is to receive \$90.2 million in county funds, according to a countywide July wastewater funding status provided by County Administrator Roman Gastesi.

The Key Largo district serves the equivalent of 14,000 homes, while the Cudjoe system will serve 8,700.

Gastesi, though, says the district shouldn't look at just one revenue stream, but at how each project as a whole is funded.

Gastesi said Key Largo has received \$21 million in federal funding and is due another \$7.6 million for wastewater projects. Given that, he considers the district to currently be overfunded.

"Note also Cudjoe Regional is not receiving any federal dollars and [the Key Largo district] is in unincorporated Monroe County," he said. "Should some of the federal money be allocated to Cudjoe Regional?"

The relationship between the wastewater district and the county has long been a tense one. The Florida Keys are under a state mandate to be connected to advanced wastewater treatment systems by December 2015.

During the 2013 legislative session, legislators balked on sending the Keys \$50 million in promised grant money for wastewater projects. District and county lobbyists weren't working together, but holding separate meetings with state officials.



Wastewater district chairman Steve Gibbs that same year formed a group called Fair Share for Key Largo to press county officials for more funding for Key Largo under the threat of incorporation.

In the last few months, the district has ramped up its disparity campaign with displays at its administrative offices making the case for more county funds as well as with a detailed argument on its website's homepage.

"It stands to reason that an area like Key Largo, where the local community is saddled with an excessively high share of wastewater project costs, would struggle economically," the website states.

At a recent board meeting, the district tasked Interim District Manager Paul Christian with the responsibility of making this case for the residents.

"People need to know about this," board member Norm Higgins said.

The district claims the island is losing businesses as a result of having to foot uch of the wastewater project's cost. 

"Unsurprisingly, economic activity in the Key Largo area is lagging behind areas that have not been similarly burdened," the website states.

But Gastesi says Key Largo has benefited from county sales tax dollars on numerous non-sewer-related projects that the district is ignoring.

Since 2000, the county has spent \$14 million on the Murray E. Nelson Government and Cultural

Center, \$4.5 million on Key Largo Community Park, \$3.8 million on a new Key Largo fire station and \$5 million on the Rowell's Marina purchase, among other spending, he said.

However, other documents provided by Gastesi say since 1990 the county has sent \$161.8 million to the Lower Keys, \$42.02 million to Middle Keys and \$64.9 million to the Upper Keys. It also shows the county has sent approximately \$23 million directly to the wastewater district.

Because the district has found alternative funding sources, Gastesi and the county commission don't feel Florida Keys residents should foot the bill.

"I frankly don't see a funding disparity," Gastesi said. "I would categorize it as a funding quagmire."

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