



September 5, 2014

To the Editor:

The Free Press article entitled “District Claims Funding Unfair” addressed the wastewater funding disparity within the unincorporated area. This is an issue that needs more attention. In the article, the County claims the Key Largo project is “overfunded.”

The County notes that Key Largo has received \$21 million in federal funding and is due another \$7.6 million for wastewater projects. This is what the County described as “overfunded.” The county says Cudjoe Regional is not receiving any federal dollars and then asks whether some of the federal money should be allocated to Cudjoe Regional? Actually, even with the federal money, Monroe County’s taxpayers in Key Largo will still pay more for their sewer project. In fact, without the federal money, the disparity would increase by \$16 million, or \$1,138 per EDU. That would mean that Key Largo citizens would pay over \$2,500 more per EDU for their sewer project. Without federal money, the funding disparity would be much worse.

The County maintains that Key Largo has benefited from county sales tax dollars on numerous non-sewer-related projects. 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.

The District recognizes that County funding has benefited the Key Largo area. But whether this spending justifies the large disparity in wastewater funding is another question. Property owners in the other unincorporated areas will only pay an average of \$4,240 per EDU for projects that cost an average of \$16,889 per EDU. By comparison Key Largo property owners, will pay an average of \$5,643 per EDU out of their assessments and rates for a project that costs \$11,600 per EDU. This difference is mostly because of how the Infrastructure Sales Tax has been distributed.

County figures show that 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.” Thus Monroe County’s own records contradict the claim that Key Largo and the Upper Keys have benefitted excessively from infrastructure spending on other projects.

According to the county’s Five-Year Capital Improvement Plan, there is no relief in sight for Monroe County’s taxpayers in Key Largo. An analysis shows that overall the County will spend \$8,966,270 on projects that will specifically benefit Key Largo, an area with a population of about 14,400 people. By contrast, the county plans to spend \$126,506,143 on projects that

specifically benefit the Lower Keys, an area with a similar population. If the wastewater projects are excluded, \$19,948,081 will be spent to benefit the Lower Keys.

Much has been made of the county's purchase of Rowell's Marina in Key Largo. If we look at the county's planned expenditures on Parks and Recreation over the next five years, we see that \$5,093,000 will be spent to benefit Key Largo and \$5,832,401 will be spent in the Lower Keys. Once again, these figures, provided by Monroe County, contradict the claim that the Key Largo area has received an excessive benefit from infrastructure spending such that the wastewater funding disparity is justified.

The Key Largo Wastewater Treatment District has asked, and will continue to ask, that its ratepayers be treated fairly. District ratepayers are also Monroe County taxpayers. The contribution they make to county tax revenue is essential to the county's infrastructure program. Without their contribution, the enormous subsidies enjoyed by taxpayers in the other unincorporated areas would not be possible. We are asking for simple fairness. That is all.

Fortunately, there are County Commissioners and staff who fully realize that an unfair disparity exists and needs to be corrected. Key Largo citizens who are concerned about this issue should contact all five County Commissioners.

Margaret Blank, PE
Key Largo Wastewater Treatment District