

Last week, the citizen printed an article titled "State Cuts Keys Funds for Projects". Some items in that article need clarification.

The loss of funding could have serious ramifications for the Key Largo Wastewater District, which is line to receive \$17 million in sewer funding this year to pay down debt. The county was looking at a money swap with the Key Largo district, because Gov. Rick Scott said he will not allocate money to pay down debts, only for new projects.

The county commission had agreed to take the state money for the Cudjoe Regional and other new projects and then give Key Largo county infrastructure sales tax money in exchange. But with no state funding coming this year, the county will have to reconsider the funding agreement, Gastesi said.

"The timing is going to be tight," Gastesi said.

The \$17 million for the Key Largo Wastewater Treatment District was approved by the legislature last year. The District would have received \$12.5 million if the legislature had approved the next \$50 million of the Mayfield Grant this year. My understanding is that the \$17 million is still coming through. The Mayfield Grant was originally intended to finance and *refinance* Keys sewer projects. When the Key Largo project was nearly completed as required by the state, it was decided that the funds could not be used for refinancing after all. So after doing what they were asked to do, Key Largo taxpayers were left holding the bag.

The issue for Monroe County's taxpayers in Key Largo is not debt repayment. It is financial relief. Key Largo taxpayers over-contribute to their sewer project by an estimated \$26 million because of the way the county has distributed the infrastructure sales tax. While the Key Largo project serves the same number of households as the other projects in the unincorporated areas combined, it has received \$100 million less from the infrastructure sales tax. The state money was, and still is, the best way to correct that extreme imbalance. It would be much better if the state would simply allow the Mayfield money to be used for its intended purpose. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like that will ever happen. The swap agreement is the next best thing.

But state money is not the only way to correct the problem. It is the county that created the imbalance which has compounded the financial hardship on Key Largo taxpayers. Ultimately it is the county that is responsible for repairing it whether state money comes through or not. In 2012, when the county was desperately trying to ensure that the voters would extend the infrastructure sales tax, they made all kinds of promises. One of those promises was that up to 10% of the sales tax could be used to assist Key Largo taxpayers with the wastewater project. Projections indicate that Monroe County will receive \$19 million per year from the infrastructure sales tax. That means, that \$1.9 million per year is available to correct the \$26 million over-contribution by Key Largo taxpayers.

The county needs to get its financial house in order. They need to correct the wastewater funding disparity, and they need to control costs on the Cudjoe Regional project, which is now \$43 million over the original bid price. Perhaps the state will be more likely to provide funding if they know it will be spent responsibly and fairly.

Margaret Blank

Former General Manager - Key Largo Wastewater Treatment District