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Come on in, the water's fine.
Now, what about
sewer? Next week: Will a lawsuit and a challenge
alter the county's entire development picture?

BY RAOUL BATALLER

PORT LABELLE, FL (Monday, Mar. 24) — Ribbon-cutting celebrated officially today the flow of reverse osmosis water from Pt LaBelle's new \$6.4 million water plant since last summer to nearly 1,600 customers in Glades and Hendry counties, and also celebrated officially extension last month of a 16-inch water pipeline to the largest single tract of platted lots in central Hendry county, known as Banyan Village, whose development cannot be further blocked by Florida's Dept. of Community Affairs.

Most of the rest of development planning that county employees have been so taken with for four years, that west of LaBelle, has become the hostage of DCA. At the moment there is a breathing space, the housing lull, during which the county may make yet another counterproposal to DCA hinging on the progress of LaBelle's utilities program, which fails utterly to meet state sewer requirements. Or, the county could turn in an entirely different direction, to opening up the center of the county where thousands of platted lots already exist right on Rte

80. All it would take would be a sewer line. And a sewer line to Banyan Village or a package plant could be extended north a mile or two to find customers in the jewel of the area's development opportunities, the banks of the Caloosahatchee River east to Indian Hills.

The new plant has a 900,000 gallons per day capacity, only needing at the moment one third of that capacity to serve its existing number of customers. No immediate steps need be taken to assure enough water will be generated in the future, since the plant capacity is easily expandable.

But the pipeline, the co-celebrant at today's proceedings, can alter the economic development picture altogether if it is radically rethought on the basis of the ramifications of new discoveries of the geology at the end of the spigot in Banyan Village.

Some rock sampling in the Banyan Village area done in timely fashion eight years ago by Craig A. Smith, a Broward engineering firm active in Glades county, might have averted today's situation in which Banyan Village has become the area's most controversial utility project.

Craig A. Smith didn't think to check the geology out there, perhaps, but was given the job anyway of designing the Port LaBelle Water Plant celebrated today. The future of Banyan Village might have been markedly different had it generally been known how much rock and water lie a few feet underground, making septic installations increasingly unlikely because in the meantime, the State of Florida has now made plain its preference for sewer systems rather than septic. With so much water in the ground and rock beneath the surface in Banyan Village, and the objections of the Corps of Engineers to flow into the Caloosahatchee, the development of all those lots cries out for a sewer line.

Banyan Village recently became the subject of a lawsuit by CHL home builders, holders of some one third of the lots in Banyan Village, charging the lateness of the arrival of utility service violated the "time is of the essence" clause in the 1996 contract signed by the county in purchasing the utility. The lawsuit takes the logical if unusual stance of linking county property appraisal of oasis land, which determines how much revenue flows to administration, and the failure of administration to deliver the water to the waterless parcels required to make it an oasis to begin with.

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Harold Reecer honored

PORT LaBELLE, FL (Monday, Mar. 24) — The honoree today was Harold Reecer, now frail with age, who led the county-authorized citizens advisory group that created the utility. Most significantly, he alone consistently hounded the county to not welch on its utility purchase contract obligations while all around him, save County Commissioner Kevin McCarthy, viewed contract requirements as binding. McCarthy alone seems to have seen an obligation as an obligation, and neither as an option, nor a political football.

Note: there were indications this week that prior county officials had deep-sixed the vexing 1996 utility-purchase agreement signed by former County Commissioner Cecil Akin and County Clerk Christine Pratt. County officials seemed eager this week to get their hands on the Sunday News's copy.

Meeting minutes show Reecer was appointed to the utility Advisory board in June, 1997 and was the first, in July of the following year, to complain about the property appraiser's hiking of assessments, from \$2,000 to \$5,000, on the connection of some lots to water service. The market value of units No. 1 to No. 9 had not been established, he argued. From the beginning, the Property Appraiser would hold firm on raising the

appraisals of units connected to water.

Port LaBelle's utility program as a whole proceeded in four phases, three of which were completed promptly. The fourth, connecting to the distant Banyan Village, was perceived in the summer of 1999 as speculative, an obligation to be treated differently from the others because it would cost more and few people could see the future in the area.

Reecer asked in August of 1999 what was being done about Banyan, and County Atty Dan Stevens responded with a flood of concerns: cost and cash flow analyses would have to be specially done and months of delays began. Reecer replied that this is a very serious issue and the county needs to take a look at it.

In September Reecer asked about it and was told by Stevens to expect figures in November but that the county would not have the money to do it this year. A local accountant, Bill Kisker, did the analysis and suggested that a water plant expansion would be necessary before extending the pipe. Stevens urged Reecer's board to urge the county commissioners to abandon the Banyan pipeline idea. Reecer opposed it, arguing that the area needed growth badly. When Reecer brought up Banyan again in December, 2000, Stevens replied, "If we do the water plant it would be quite

awhile before we could do Banyan Village."

In June of 2001 the county commissioners began the process of building a new water plant. the following January Stevens assured Reecer that the county still extended to run the pipe to Banyan "sometime in the future."

In December, 2002 Reecer said \$3.2 million would be needed for Banyan. He didn't know how to do it, but just knew it had to be done. County Admin. Lester Baird assured him the county's clear intention was to send pipe to Banyan as soon as the county could figure out how to accomplish it. The following month Baird complained the county lacked resources and staff to do the job. In April Reecer reiterated that the Advisory board has an obligation to put water to Banyan. Baird again sought a new cost estimate from Craig A. Smith.

In July of 2003 Reecer said it was not fair to residents of Banyan who are paying into the escrow account to have interest on that money used to fund the new buildings in the county budget.

In September, 2003 Baird began denying that Hendry county had ever agreed to a plan to send water to Banyan. Commissioners led by McCarthy and Darrell Harris moved for new reports that kept the project going.