

**PORT LABELLE UTILITY SYSTEM  
ADVISORY BOARD MINUTES**

**July 21, 2008  
Hendry County Board of County Commissioners Chambers  
25 E. Hickpochee Avenue  
LaBelle, FL 33035  
1:00 P.M.**

**Board Members Present:**

George Davis, Chairman  
Richard Bass  
Warren Grant

**Other Attendees:**

Roger Greer, PLUS Director  
Yvonne Cayce, PLUS Staff Assistant  
John Capece, PLUS Advisory Board Facilitator

**Board Members Absent:**

Han Mouthaan  
Paul Samerdyke

**1) Call to Order – George Davis**

Chairman, George Davis, called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. on July 21, 2008.

**2) Review of March Minutes**

Copies of the May 12, 2008 minutes were distributed and reviewed by members. Motion to accept minutes, with two minor corrections, was made by Richard Bass and seconded by Warren Grant. Motion carried unanimously.

**3) Director's Report – Roger Greer**

Roger Greer reported the following statistics:

Water Plant Usage for June = 11,108,400 gallons  
Average Per day = 336,946 gallons  
Max. Per day = 376,000 gallons

This Time Last Year = 10,624,503 gallons  
This Time Last Year = 354,150 gallons  
This Time Last Year = 682,650 gallons

Wastewater Treated for June = 8,607,000 gallons  
Average Per day = 287,000 gallons  
Max. Per day = 388,000 gallons

This Time Last Year = 5,507,000 gallons  
This Time Last Year = 184,000 gallons  
This Time Last Year = 262,000 gallons

Mar. – July:                      Meter Sets = 6                      New Requests = 5                      Outstanding = 67

Ricky Bass questioned why 67-meter connections were outstanding. Roger stated that the connection fees were paid some time ago, but people are not moving on their properties. In fact, many are just walking away from their homes and allowing them to go into foreclosure. Not only are customers abandoning their homes, they are also abandoning their bills with no notification to PLUS. Utility bills are being returned to the office stamped by the post office as undeliverable. As a result, much time is spent researching documents, the Property Appraiser's records, and various websites in an effort to locate the owners. Some owners are located, but upon contact, refuse to accept responsibility for their debt. They reason if they are not living in the homes, nor using the services, they are not paying for them. It has been helpful that some title companies and realtors have contacted the PLUS office to ascertain debts associated with properties they are trying to

sell. As a result, outstanding PLUS debts have been included on the settlement and satisfied prior to, or at the time of closing.

In an effort to collect monies owed, PLUS staff will compile a list of customers with unpaid debts totaling \$500.00 or more, with the prospect of possibly placing liens against these properties. Time spent, and costs associated with placing liens on properties, will be tracked to determine if this procedure proves to be effective or worthwhile.

#### **4) Water Consumption Data – John Capece**

John provided water consumption graphs for the board members to review. He reiterated Roger's point concerning the new meter requests and installations, and how they've flat lined. Consumption peaked out in May averaging 400,000 gallons per day, which correspondingly matches the peaks in May of 2006 and 2007. The Wastewater plant is running consistently around the 300,000 – 350,000 level, with the annual peak expected around August or September. Also, with a high water table and heavy rainfall, ground water starts seeping into the sewer lines. As to concentrate data, it's currently not updated as meters are being looked at and some questions have to be answered about the data.

#### **5) PLUS Draft Budget – Roger Greer**

Hendry County requested that all departments make budget cuts. PLUS has cut its budget drastically and continues to tighten the belt as much as possible. Board members were invited to look at the right column on their copy of the budget document to see some of the cuts. Roger stated that there are reoccurring expenses of about \$66,000.00 more than income. This is due, largely, to water restrictions, the abandonment of homes, and customers refusing to pay bills on unoccupied homes. However, after a budget meeting with Jennifer Davis, Roger says he feels comfortable that the deficit can be absorbed.

Also in an effort to cut expenses, capital items such as trucks and equipment will not be purchased this year. Personnel have been informed to use discernment and to keep their trucks off the road as much as possible in an effort to conserve fuel and wear and tear of the vehicles. Plant personnel have been instructed to conserve energy by adjusting the thermostats in the evening, and switching lights off when possible. As stated during the last board meeting, the position currently available at PLUS will not be filled due to lack of construction, thus a significant savings in salary expenses.

In answering John Capece's question as to operating expenses on the new water plant relative to the old, Roger stated that the new plant incurs more expense with energy (power) than the old plant. Chemicals, however, prove to be less expensive for the new plant as compared to the old. Operating expenses, therefore, remain basically unaffected. As to staffing of the plants, certified operators are required. It's difficult, however, to find certified operators who are willing to come to LaBelle, as there are no incentives offered. To insure effective operation of the plants, employees have been cross-trained and sent to schools to obtain certifications and licenses. Three employees will be taking exams in August for double certification, which will add a lot of flexibility in staffing both the water and wastewater plants. In addition to staffing the plants, an employee is sent to Airglades each day to check on the water plant, wastewater plant, lift station, etc., and Airglades is billed for this service. In an attempt to alleviate the shortage of operators, DEP is giving exams more frequently, and has a site in Fort Myers where exams can be taken with scoring immediately available. In the past, some who received certification left for the City of LaBelle or other entities that offered more money, but that is not the case now. It is not anticipated that PLUS employees, receiving certification, will move on to other areas.

Looking at other avenues to assist with the budget, John Capece stated that he's been talking to Rock Aboujaoude, who is serving in an advisory capacity for the County. The County has put together a group to make recommendations on economic development and some of them include water issues. It would be advantageous to approach the State with a wish list for economic assistance relative to wastewater issues.

They have grant programs available that distribute funds for water and wastewater. It would be worthwhile to check out these grants, come up with a wish list, and lobby for it.

Board member, Ricky Bass, asked if the Banyan Village project put PLUS in the red. Roger said that we've been in the red before, but have always been able to absorb the deficit. He added that it's not as bad as it may seem, as PLUS has been getting annual assessment payments from units 1-9. Also, according to Jennifer Davis, it looks like we may be getting about \$500,000.00 back from USDA, which will probably be used to pay for the new well.

John stated that it would be worthwhile to attend the meeting scheduled later in the day in Clewiston dealing with economic development fall out in relation to the closing of U.S. Sugar. He feels that PLUS could make a pretty good case, and perhaps appeal to the district concerning well costs.

#### **6) Replacement Well – Roger Greer**

Danny Nelson received DEP and SFWMD permits for replacement of the well. He will present preliminary plans in the near future for review and then put out to bid as soon as possible.

#### **7) DEP Permit Application for WTP Concentrate Bypass of WWTP – Roger Greer**

Roger stated that he received the permit last week. PLUS staff will be redirecting the water plant concentrate from the head of the plant to downstream of the plant.

#### **8) Revised SFWMD Water Use Permit Application – John Capece**

John has had some discussions with Terry Bangston of SFWMD particularly in light of the U.S. Sugar development. Some of the permits that have been approved, including the City of LaBelle, DCA, Bonita Bay, etc. have been facilitated by the U.S. Sugar situation. PLUS has been held down with some of the BEBR numbers, so one of the first things we need to do is go for the 1.2 mgd. and hope they will be receptive. As far as economic development, Port LaBelle is one of the few areas that exist that's in a ready mode. If entities are looking to promote development in Hendry County, Port LaBelle is a location where it's easy for them to facilitate infrastructure improvements. We should, therefore, insist upon the full 1.2 mgd rather than conceding to the BEBR population numbers.

The other aspect of the water use permit is the computer modeling. They've asked for some very sophisticated analysis on impact to the river and wetlands. These are being worked on in an effort to get the computer modeling completed as soon as possible.

There's also a SFWMD replacement board member to be named. The Southwest Florida seat is typically reserved for the agriculture or rural interest. One name that has been mentioned to fill this seat is Tommy Duda. When asked, John stated that he has spoken from the prospect of River Watch, and not the utility, and answered that Duda is the only group to participate in past events. The new nominee, whom ever it proves to be, should be informed about PLUS issues.

John encouraged the board members to actively consider making requests to the Federal government. Such requests could include improvements to the PLUS sewer system, wastewater plant upgrade, piping infrastructure, and conservation programs. Ricky Bass emphasized that we need programs to encourage people to come to Port LaBelle. Roger added that he would work closely with Ron Zimmerly in the Grant and Special Projects department to watch for avenues of funding. George Davis stated that he would like to have the golf course renovated and put back into use. John said this could possibly be presented as one of the requests.

There are some people talking about large redevelopment plans for this region, but their conceptual plans do not tend to be realistic. There is a need to redirect their good intentions more toward practical endeavors.

Ricky Bass asked if there are any costs being allocated for Banyan Village, and if there is any upkeep while nothing is going on. Roger answered that we are supplying water out there and back. All the lots in Banyan Village are being putting on the tax roll this year at \$2.00 a month. Roger said that when the report is received back, and recommendations are reviewed, then we'll know more. John added that raising this fee from \$2.00 to \$3.00 a month would generate an additional \$130,000 a year. As to development of Banyan Village, nothing has been heard. John suggested that we request assistance from DCA to come up with a plan to help promote activity in this area. Unfortunately, with fuel prices what they are, and other critical economic issues, people don't want to live fifteen miles outside of town.

Also, on the lines of economic issues, John met with Tim Mahoney, Ron Zimmerly, and others and emphasized the need for a bio-fuel research development center. Ron has written up, and submitted, a small grant for \$1,000,000. In answering George Davis' question about Alico, John stated that Alico had received a grant for \$23,000,000. It was rumored that they were looking to build a research center, however, they walked away from the grant. John added that if we get the bio-fuel grant, the County could, perhaps, seek ownership of the CHL construction office building on Raintree Blvd., which would accommodate twenty personnel easily.

**9) Rate Study – Roger Greer**

Roger said Danny Nelson of Tetra-Tech informed him that he has received some data, however, personnel working on this was pulled away on another project. It may be, therefore, another two or three weeks before additional data is received. Danny also informed Roger, that with just an overview, it looks like there should be a rate increase, but it is unknown at this point how much. Roger stated that the \$66,000.00 deficit would equate to approximately \$4.00 per person, per household, per month. Larger communities can offer lower rates, however, PLUS is a much smaller community with about 1600 customers.

**10) Other Issues**

None

**11) Schedule Next Meeting & Adjourn**

It was decided that the next meeting would be scheduled after the well was put out to bid and bids received. Board Members will then be contacted and a date will be scheduled for the next meeting.

Chairman, George Davis, adjourned the meeting at 2:05 p.m.