

## Storms/

from A1

occurred,” he said.

Moving forward, there were lessons learned.

Stecher said he would like additional generators in preparation for the next storm season, as well as upgrades to staff equipment.

“We also want to work with the county department to improve communication within department and to customers,” he said.

There are a few things the public can do to help prevent stress on the system during hurricanes and when the system is down.

“Reduce the amount of water used (dishwashers, laundry, showers) until the system is able to get back to normal,” he said.

Additionally, residents reporting their water concerns can help staff, even if it doesn’t directly affect them.

“If you see something, say something,” Stecher said.

The Englewood Water District said they had roughly eight sewage spills between Debby, Milton and



CHARLOTTE COUNTY UTILITIES

Charlotte County Utilities will spend tens of millions of dollars over the next decade expanding its water and sewer lines and replacing old lines.

Helene. Three of those were on Manasota Key.

One of the bigger spills was due to the tides inundating the system.

“One of the manholes actually had the lid came off, so we were basically spilling out of the top of the manhole, and the problem was we did not know about it,” EWD interim Administrator/Technical Support

Manager Keith Ledford Jr. said. “That wasn’t called in for 17 days after the event had happened, and the customer actually called Charlotte County, not us.”

Ledford said had the crews known about it, there wouldn’t have been as much of a spill as what happened.

“The other two out there on the Key were more just in recovery efforts of both

Helene and Milton,” Ledford said.

EWD Wastewater Operations Manager David Larson said the district isolates the spill to stop it.

“As soon as we know of it, repair the work, if we can,” Larson said. “We have vacuum trucks that we will try and recover as much of the spilled wastewater that we can, and then after that, we disinfect the area with lime to make sure that it’s clear and safe again.”

Ledford added that there are cases when the spill mixes in ditches already full of water and the crews take out as much water as possible because there’s no way of knowing which is sewage and which is drainage.

“When it does go into the bay, we are required by DEP to sample the water at the spill upstream and downstream until those results come back to where what would be a normal coliform count,” Larson said.

Ledford and Larson said the public can help minimize the possibility of a spill by never removing clean-out caps on a sewer.

“The sewer system is not intended to drain your yard,” Ledford said. “By doing that, it negatively impacts our system and causes a larger part of the system to go down.”

Vacuum vents are also not intended to drain yards, and it’s important to not stack debris on those or manholes.

“I mean, the biggest thing right now that we are working on is just trying to get all those broken vents, all those broken clean outs, all of that fixed so that if we do have another event, we’re not going to be really bad off,” Ledford said.

Ledford said properties being demoed have become a concern as well. Cap-offs aren’t being scheduled and during a rain event, the pipe is wide open, meaning water will directly inundate the system.

“Let’s make sure your sewer is capped off, so we’re not going to impact the system for your neighbors,” Ledford said.

After the hurricanes, especially on Manasota Key, Ledford and Larson

said debris covered meters, manholes and vacuums. It made it harder for crews to maintain the system.

“What looks like a manhole might actually be a vacuum pit, and when we’re trying to get out there and do our recovery efforts, a lot of times, you have to go to every pit and fire the valve inside there,” Larsons said.

“So when they pile stuff on top of that, we now have to spend time moving everything off of it to get into it, and fire that valve.”

Ledford and Larson said the community can always report something to EWD even if they’re not sure.

“Anything that the public can do to not bury that vacuum pit, or just be aware of what they’re doing when they do that stuff, more than anything, and yes, let us know,” Larson said.

Punta Gorda faced a 1.6 million-gallon raw sewage spill from its master pump station at the the city’s main wastewater treatment plant at 900 W. Henry St during Helene.

That spill went into Charlotte Harbor.

## Season/

from A1

along the shoreline, beach advisories went into effect, and tour boats remained docked as communities felt the weight of the crisis.

This stark reality revealed the vulnerability of the region’s aging sewer systems, long neglected and ill-equipped to handle such extreme weather events.

While some local governments have begun addressing decades of neglect, the sheer volume of sewage spilled last season demonstrates that piecemeal fixes have fallen short and underscores the critical need for comprehensive, systemic reforms to protect our environment and public health against future storms.

“We know about the aging sewage infrastructure across the country and how it’s creating problems,” said Katie Bauman, Florida policy manager for the Surfrider Foundation, an environmental nonprofit that works to preserve oceans.



PHOTO BY JOSH SALMAN/SUNCOAST SEARCHLIGHT

Tanks treat and store sewage at Sarasota County’s Bee Ridge reclamation facility. The facility can process 12 million gallons of sewage on average per day, but during Debby, facility was running a peak flow of more than 20 million gallons a day

“Here, it’s compounded by climate issues like rising sea-level and increased flooding.

“So much of what we hear is out of sight, out of mind, and that’s the line time and again until there’s a catastrophe.”

From Palmetto down to Englewood, officials

project it will cost billions of dollars to bring the aging sewage infrastructure across the Suncoast up to modern standards.

The aging pipes outlived their intended lifespan decades ago. But it wasn’t until environmental advocates started suing municipalities in 2016 that they

began to prioritize fixing cracks in the pipes, loose line connections and plant deficiencies.

The millions of dollars spent on stopgaps and retrofits since have failed to keep pace with the region’s booming populations and intensified rainfalls.

In the past three decades

alone, the combined population of Sarasota and Manatee counties has about doubled to nearly 1 million people — all flushing toilets and adding strain to sewer systems never designed to handle those kinds of loads.

The growth comes as the warming Earth has supercharged storms, with even regular rainfalls dumping more water.

“All of these things are the result of a changing climate,” said Bob Bunting, chief executive of the Climate Adaptation Center in Sarasota. “Then you add population growth, and you have a recipe for disaster.”

To be sure, sewer systems malfunction for reasons other than storms. But of the 830 spills across the Suncoast during the past five years, just 38 were labeled as accidents and another 103 were contractor mistakes, Suncoast Searchlight found. Nothing produced anything even close to the havoc of issues associated with rainfall.

Local government officials interviewed by Suncoast Searchlight blamed the sewage breaks on sins of past predecessors, pointing to more recent efforts to address sewer infrastructure and improve water quality throughout the region.

“We are in this like everyone else,” said Mohammed Rayan, public works director for the city of Palmetto. “The old terracotta (clay) pipes are not sealed, so we’re going through to line them and replace them, but of course, funding is a challenge. The storms we had last year were unprecedented. I don’t think any system in the world would sustain it.”

Suncoast governments scramble to contain sewage pollution

Through the three major storms last year,

Bradenton’s system released far more sewage than any other local government.

The city’s system was built to handle 9 million gallons of sewage a day. During Hurricane Debby, it was drowning in more than three times that amount.

City officials scrambled to create more capacity, but the plant on 1st Street West still couldn’t keep up. Twenty-five million gallons of wastewater surged into the Manatee River.

Days later, another 1.6 million gallons of raw sewage spilled into the river and nearby Ware’s Creek.

Seven weeks after that came Hurricane Helene and its record levels of storm surge that flooded the barrier islands and shorelines of Sarasota and Manatee counties. Stormwater from the disaster inundated the lift stations on Longboat Key, damaging their electrical panels and sending tens of thousands of gallons of untreated waste into the gulf.

By the time Hurricane Milton hit in October, sewage spilled out of manholes in Palmetto, a Mosaic Co. fertilizer mine released industrial waste into the small community of Lithia, and an effluent holding tank in Sarasota overflowed into a creek.

“You have these intense rainfalls that are getting worse,” said Justin Bloom, founder of Suncoast Waterkeeper. “Our wastewater infrastructure is not designed to address this new reality. Every time there’s a hurricane, there’s major overflows. The question is whether that’s just the cost of doing business?”

Despite repeated sewage failures, environmental advocates say elected officials did not prioritize major retrofits until

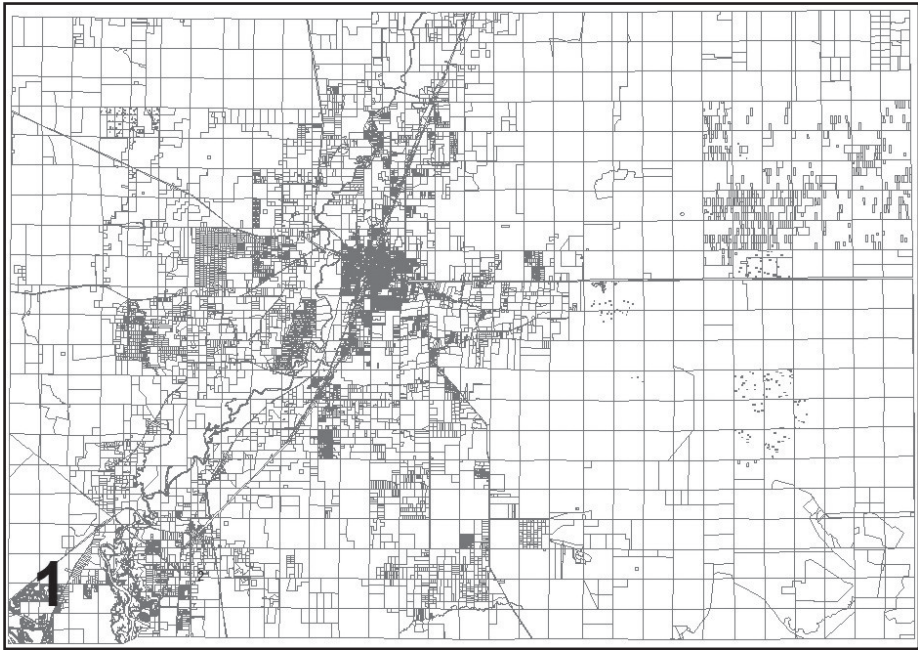
### NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

The DeSoto County Board of County Commissioners (Board), Florida will consider the adoption of the resolution(s) regarding the below-described development order application. The resolution(s) will be considered at regularly scheduled Public Hearing Meetings of the Board of County Commissioners on the dates listed and at the times listed below, or as soon thereafter, as they may be heard on that date. All public hearings will be held in the County Commission Meeting Room 103, Administration Building, 201 E. Oak Street, Arcadia, Florida. Copies of the applications and staff reports are available at the Development Department Room 204, Administration Building, 201 E. Oak Street, Arcadia, Florida five days prior to the meeting dates and are available on the County’s website at [www.desotobocc.com](http://www.desotobocc.com) under Department News and News & announcements. Members of the public may appear and be heard on the matters to be considered. If you want to appeal any decision of the Board, you may need to arrange for a verbatim transcript to be prepared.

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS: Tuesday, March 25, 2025 at 6:30 PM


#### 1. Resolution, Oak Stone LLC (VAC-0017-2023)

A RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OF DESOTO COUNTY, FLORIDA, VACATING A PORTION OF STONEYBROOK OAKS SUBDIVISION, AS RECORDED IN PLAT BOOK 9, PAGE 92, PUBLIC RECORDS OF DESOTO COUNTY, GENERALLY LOCATED IN SECTIONS 29 AND 30, TOWNSHIP 39 S, RANGE 23 E, DESOTO, COUNTY FLORIDA, THE LEGAL DESCRIPTION AND SKETCH OF SAID PORTIONS TO BE VACATED BEING INCLUDED IN “EXHIBIT A”; AND PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE.



PUBLISH: AS DISPLAY AD Friday, March 7, 2025 and Friday, March 14, 2025

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