

Lee County Lehigh Acres Septic-to-Sewer Conversion Project Description (LeeCountyPD_GPS4)

Lee County proposes to hire a consultant to provide a high-level, conceptual approach to septic-to-sewer conversions in the low- and moderate-income neighborhoods of Lehigh Acres in unincorporated Lee. This necessitates dividing Lehigh Acres into prioritized areas for implementation, including related street, sidewalk and drainage improvements. The overarching goal is to preserve the value of affordable housing stock while lessening the risk of impacts on surface water quality. This study must also identify objectives for coordinating septic-to-sewer conversion with current County initiatives for storm and coastal surge, for regional water quality initiatives, and for planned road improvements.

1. A. Project purpose

Lee County proposes a plan to identify areas of Lehigh Acres where septic-to-sewer conversion will:

- Extend the safe, habitable lifetime and preserve the economic attainability of residences in neighborhoods that are a valuable source of affordable housing stock;
- Assess the relative impact on regional surface water quality from failing septic systems in specific neighborhoods;
- Assess the relative risk of septic systems in flood-prone areas; a particular problem in Lehigh Acres where post-Hurricane Irma flooding revealed areas of concern;
- Coordinate septic-to-sewer conversion objectives with planned flood risk mitigation projects and road improvement efforts; and
- Provide the County with a framework to budget for capital improvement and major maintenance projects.

This planning effort will be coordinated with Lee County's current storm and water-quality mitigation planning, which already includes:

- Assessment of Riverine Flood risk and Mitigation Project Recommendation – In response to rainy season and Hurricane Irma flooding in 2017, Lee County Commissioners have invested nearly \$6 million in short-term and long-term flood resiliency efforts that include:
 - \$1.9 million for a Southern Lee County Flood Protection Study, which includes modeling specific to the Lehigh Acres area to determine the value of potential projects;
 - \$3 million in capital investment projects including sediment removal in canals and ditches;
 - Administrative changes to the East Mulloch Water Control District, including Lee County assuming responsibility for a \$7.1 million CDBG-DR grant to replace sidewalks and drainage systems in the San Carlos Park area; and
 - A maintenance agreement with the South Florida Water Management District for 13 rivers and creeks.
- Assessment of Coastal Storm Surge Risk – FEMA has issued preliminary Lee County Flood Insurance Rate maps resulting from state-of-the-art coastal analysis. These maps will likely become effective in 2021. For mitigation strategy and project recommendations, Lee County

continues to participate in the FEMA/NFIP Community Rating System (CRS) and the requirements of the Florida Department of Emergency Management for Local Mitigation Strategy and Comprehensive Emergency Management plans and projects.

- Planned road improvements throughout Lehigh Acres, which was originally platted as a private residential area in the 1960's. Years of minimal maintenance to a mixed roadway network of gravel and chip sealed roads left the street grid in poor condition. In the early 1970's, Lee County began to assume maintenance and repair of the 1,500+ miles of Lehigh roadways. Upon full acquisition of these roads, a commitment was made by the BOCC to invest \$1 million annually in paving improvements. In 2017, the BOCC increased the Lehigh Acres Paving Program to \$5 million per year for the next 20 years. Due to the sparse development in many areas of Lehigh, this program is constructing the first hard-surface pavement on many of the roads, providing significantly improved all-weather access to these Lee County homes.

Lee County is looking for a conceptual pilot plan that would specifically examine delivering vital public and social services under FEMA's Community Lifelines:

- **Health and Medical**, specifically ensuring against the spread of water-borne contaminants by replacing potentially failing septic tanks with compliant and reliable water and sewer systems to be provided by the Florida Governmental Utility Authority (FGUA);
- **Transportation**, specifically assessing street and sidewalk upgrades that would be designed along with the roadside installation of water and sewer lines; and
- **Hazardous Materials**, specifically assessing any potential for spills or other exposure.

Against this framework, there are four overarching issues to be addressed in valuing or prioritizing planning recommendations:

First, the plan will be mindful of cost/benefit assessments that value providing solutions to the greatest number of local residents and will be effective for the longest period of time. This plan will consider Lehigh Acres' overall potential for safe and reasonable investment in septic-to-sewer conversion. There are 32,879 permitted septic tanks in Lehigh Acres.

Second, the plan will identify particular risks and the relative value of those risks on housing, on general economic issues faced by residents and on access to needed services by Lehigh's low- and moderate-income households.

Lee County is a HUD-determined MID community, with 42% of its population – approximately 277,000 people, qualified LMI to HUD standards. Of Lee's 517 Census block groups, 32% are designated LMI.

More than 48,000 Lehigh Acres households – more than 54% of the community's population – are LMI households, many of them living in structures built in the 1960s through the early 1980s, before Lee County joined the NFIP in 1984 and before post-Hurricane Andrew advances in the Florida Building Code. These non-compliant structures are in high demand as part of the county's stock of affordable and attainable housing. This planning effort will consider the relative cost of the loss of this housing stock and the cost of providing social and other government services resulting from the displacement of LMI populations.

This is particularly a problem in Lehigh Acres where investments valued at 50% or higher than the value of the home require that the entire structure be brought up to current regulations of the National Flood Insurance Program. This results in a narrow opportunity for extending the habitable life of a property. As a result, this regulation is often a barrier to upgrades to housing by low- and moderate-income property owners and renters, who are more likely to do “bandaid” repairs and improvements than take on the expense of an entire upgrade-to-code. As a result, neighborhoods sink into non-compliant decay.

Another particular concern for Lehigh Acres is access to mass transit. LeeTran has two bus routes within Lehigh Acres, only one of which provides service to and from Fort Myers. Route 110 travels from the Edison Mall in Fort Myers to Homestead Plaza in Lehigh Acres. The Route 515 continues from Homestead Plaza to East 12th Street along Joel Boulevard.

LeeTran aims to offer a new mobility-on-demand (MOD) service, which will usurp the Route 515. The MOD service will operate as a fixed-route feeder with a collection point at the existing Homestead Plaza transfer location, where it would meet the Route 110. As configured, this service would cover a 42-square mile zone. This service would eventually move to a new proposed park-and-ride lot in Lehigh Acres.

LeeTran has an opportunity to centrally locate a park-and-ride facility within Lehigh Acres along Williams Avenue. This facility would enable the community to park their vehicles and ride the bus into Fort Myers. The project site is adjacent to the future Lehigh Acres Park expansion.

Third, this planning proposal aims to maintain or improve Lee County’s Class 5 membership in the CRS. Lee County requires that this study and its expected outcomes comply with CRS guidelines and will identify possible opportunities for gaining additional points in the system. In conjunction with this issue, Lee County will consider compliance to Florida Building Codes and recommended updates to the Lee Plan, Lee County’s DEO-approved comprehensive plan and any other changes to Lee County Administrative Code or policy.

Finally, recommendations of this planning study will include options for communicating the objectives recommended by the study to Lee County staff who will assume tasks to implement plans and strategies and to the general public which may be affected by the plan.

1. B. Area of Benefit

Lehigh Acres, a 92-square-mile Census Designated Place that generally follows the boundaries of the Lehigh Fire District, an independent taxing district. The consultant will be instructed to define the exact boundaries of the study area to include downstream wastewater connections. Offsite improvements may need to be identified, particularly for tie-ins to force mains and gravity sewers and to avoid adverse impacts to existing utility infrastructure.

1. C. Description of the proposed activity

Selection of a consultant will be through a Request for Proposal process that will encourage the bidder to enhance and refine these proposed activities:

- Kick-off meeting to identify needed materials (master plans, existing county reports, plats, easements, etc.) and staff input to:

- Identify the study area with specific consideration to dividing Lehigh Acres into prioritized areas for phases of implementation, which are likely to correspond to proposed implementation of Lee County flood control and road improvement projects;
- Finalize the scope of the planning project;
- Finalize the timeline, deliverables and tasks;
- Review of utility master plans, other county plans and reports;
- Engineering review of FGUA and Lee County Utilities (LCU) current assets (wastewater mains, laterals and other structures), specifically flow demands and water quality issues to make recommendations for accommodating septic-to-sewer conversion with recommendations for placement of lines and methods of conveyance (gravity and force mains);
- Provide guidance on a cost/benefit methodology to assess the value of preserving affordable housing stock against the costs of investing in non-compliant housing;
- Create the overall concept for septic-to-sewer conversion; and
- Identify adaptation alternatives and recommendations.

2. Risk Mitigation

The primary objective is to assess risks and suggest mitigation guidelines for:

- Impacts on surface water from septic systems;
- Compliance to BMAP and water quality objectives;
- Mitigate the risk of septic field contamination due to riverine flooding; and
- Specifically assessing any potential for exposure to hazardous materials.

3. Tasks and Team

Major tasks and team members associated with this proposal include:

- Response to DEO requests for information including participation in a site visit – Joan LaGuardia, Lee County Performance Analyst, jlaguardia@leegov.com, is the primary point of contact;
- Review, negotiation and signing of the grant agreement document – Joan LaGuardia;
- Processing of forms and assurances for RFP preparation – Lindsay Cepero, Lee County Procurement Manager, lcepero@leegov.com;
- Review of the RFP submission and awarding of the contract – Lindsay Cepero;
- Project management and monitoring – Mark Sunyak; Lee County Utilities Engineering Manager, MSunyak@leegov.com;
- Quarterly reporting and invoicing to DEO for the grant management process – Richard Kolk, Fiscal Manager, rkolk@leegov.com, 239-533-8147;
- Project liaison to the Southern Lee County Flood Protection Study – Luis Molina, Lee County Natural Resources Engineering Manager, LMolina@leegov.com.
- Project liaison to LMI communities and services – Clare Dennehy, Lee County Human and Veteran Services Grants Compliance Coordinator, CDennehy@leegov.com;

- Project liaison for Public Safety and Emergency Management – Britton Holdaway, Emergency Management Planner, bholdaway@leegov.com; and
- Grant project closeout – Richard Kolk, Fiscal Manager, rkolk@leegov.com, 239-533-8147.

4. Determination of Funding Requirements

Lee County estimates the cost of this study to be \$346,725 based on these sources and comparable planning contracts:

- Proposal for Professional Services: Naples Manor Storm water Improvements Preliminary Engineering Study, 2020;
- Collier County: Concept Plan for Palm River Neighborhood Water, Storm water, and Irrigation Infrastructure Improvements, 2020;
- Lee County Miscellaneous Planning Services for the Green Meadow Road Community Facility Planned Development, 2018;
- Lee County Professional Planning Services for Burnt Store Road, 2018; and
- Lee County Professional Planning Services for LeeTran EEO Plan Update, 2017.

This total also includes:

- An estimate of administrative costs at 5% of the direct planning costs; and
- A contingency of 10% of the direct planning costs to account for unforeseen costs, including potential accommodation of doing business during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The required budget document specifically breaks out estimated costs for tasks.

5. Anticipated Outcomes

Specific outcomes will include recommendations for:

- A high-level, conceptual approach to assess impacts of surface water quality and flood control on affordable housing stock in Lehigh Acres, Lee County;
- Prioritizing the approach to mitigating the risk and suggestion of general mitigation options;
- Specific planning for septic-to-sewer conversion, related street, sidewalk and drainage – if and where feasible;
- Possible options for achieving TMDLs and other compliance objectives;
- Coordination with current County initiatives for storm and coastal surge and for regional water quality;
- Compliance with all state, NFIP, CRS and FEMA guidance.

6. Compliance to Existing Comprehensive Plan

The Lee Plan specifically addresses Lehigh Acres in Community Planning Goal 25 and The Lehigh Acres Community Plan Overlay. Objective 25.9: Sewer and Water: Expedite the staged extension of water and sewer systems, connect lots previously served by on-site septic and wells, and discourage additional development that is reliant upon on-site well and septic systems. (Ordinance No. 10-16, 18-18); includes these pertinent policies:

- POLICY 25.9.1: The availability of sewer and water to serve uses within the Specialized Mixed Use Nodes and the Commercial Overlay Zones is not a requirement for zoning approval. However, sewer and water must be available to the property in accordance with Standard 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 before a development order will be issued. (Ordinance No. 10-16, 18-18);
- POLICY 25.9.2: Direct new development and redevelopment in Lehigh Acres to areas that can be reasonably expected to receive urban services and infrastructure during the planning horizon. (Ordinance No. 10-16, 18-18); and
- POLICY 25.9.3: Lee County will work with Florida Governmental Utilities Authority (FGUA) to prioritize areas for the expansion of utilities. (Ordinance No. 10-16, 18-18).

In addition to complying with the Lee Plan, recommendations of this planning effort will consider and comply with:

- The Lee County Local Mitigation Strategy (LMS), approved by the Florida Department of Emergency Management (FEDM);
- The Lee County Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP), also approved by FDEM;
- The Lee County Utilities Risk and Resiliency Study being delivered to the Environmental Protection Agency as part of the 2018 America's Water Infrastructure Act;
- Lee County's Flood Hazard Ordinance, which is based on the requirements of membership in the National Flood Insurance Program and its CRS.