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## LOCAL

# Low water pressure plagues Fort Myers; new facilities and a county hookup may help



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Fort Myers News-Press

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Fading water pressure in their homes has some Fort Myers city residents desperate for action by the city to bring back the strong flow of freshwater that is taken for granted by so many until the water slows to a trickle.

Residents, especially in neighborhoods to the south of the city, have been complaining that water pressure has been so low basic parts of daily life have become a chore.

Some turned out Tuesday at City Hall where the city council got an update from City Manager Marty Lawing on the city's plan to fix water problems attributed to inadequate facilities and a swiftly rising population.

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Residents told the council about being unable to take proper showers, crawling under the bathtub spigot to get enough water to rinse their hair, washing clothes in mini-loads because the machine's tub can't be filled, or waiting as water trickles into a glass or pitcher.

Mike Hodgins, a resident of Pelican Preserve in south Fort Myers says that as a condominium owner with an upper story unit, he is at the mercy of what the city can deliver.

"Everything is being thrown back at me as an owner," he said.

"It's heart-wrenching as a husband to not be able to fix something, fixing some things has been something I've done for 63 years, 30 with my wife," Hodgins said, his voice cracking in

frustration as he addressed the city council.

"I can't fix this, you have the power to fix this. I know there's lots of plans — doesn't help me right now," he said.

Carole Brokke, also a resident of Pelican Preserve, shares her neighbor's frustration.

"It's almost like a third-world country," she said. "We are in dire need to be able to function on a daily basis and it seems from the beginning of January it has gotten even worse."

The problem has floated to the top of the city's quality of life issues. Water pressure, as measured by the city itself, is running low and not pumping out enough water for use in normal hygiene, cleaning, and consumption.

"Our problems are related to more demand on our water system and more people here in the city," Lawing told city council members Tuesday night. "COVID has had strange impact. More people have been here in the summer than have been here in the summer in the past five years."

Increases in population sticking around after the usual winding down of snowbird season is a factor in the higher demand and reduced supply of water.

Lawing said water use has typically increased when winter visitors arrive. He notes that the city has been pumping more water at the ends of the tourism season compared to the past.

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Water use has increased from 174 million gallons in December 2019 to 200 million gallons as the tourism season opened last month.

In April, as tourist season waned, 180 million gallons were used in April 2019, but by 2021 it had increased to 225 million gallons, Lawing said.

The city's answer is to rehabilitate and bring back some retired water tanks, at least one of which was idled four years ago, and install new tanks while upgrading water treatment facilities.

City administration is mum on the potential cost while proposals for water system upgrades are developed but everything, including a new water treatment plant, seems to be on the table.

Fort Myers is seeking to buy water from Lee County if the county can spare an adequate supply to offset the city burden and increase the water held in the city's tanks.

"Today our tank levels are at 10.5 feet (deep), which is a lot lower than we would like for it to be," Lawing said.

City wells that have been out of service are being rehabilitated, new wells are being built, and even more, are on the drawing board. But it all must be integrated in the city waterworks. Booster pumps are being considered so that water pressure is kept up while the amount of water in the tanks is low.

Water must also be taken from the ground efficiently so that it can be used effectively.

"We are not just drilling a well, you have to run a transmission line from that well to connect with other transmission lines that go to the treatment plant so there is a lot of work that is involved," Lawing said.

Taking water from the county raises questions of whether it makes sense from a cost and supply analysis — and to the surprise of many, there is a compatibility issue between Fort Myers and Lee County water.

City and county water systems use different purification systems, and the two systems are not compatible. Lawing said buying water could come with some additional costs for city government to resolve that technical issue.

Lawing said he anticipated a response this week from Lee County on Fort Myers' request to buy water. The proposal is being studied by county staff, according to county Communications Director Betsy Clayton.

"They are trying at this point to find out how much capacity they have to sell to the city and what the current pricing would be with that," Lawing said. "That would give us some relief and give us time to bring our tank levels back up — the higher the tank level the higher (pressure) we can push out of the plant."

The city is also moving to expand the existing water treatment plant to keep the water supply higher and increase the force of water coming out of the faucet.

"I don't think we have much time to waste on our expansion of our existing water treatment plant," Lawing said. "It's all about the tank levels. We don't have enough water that's the reason the pressures are where they are."

Also ahead is another push for conservation with notices in water bills advising customers that the water bill wouldn't be so high if they used less of it.

Council members urged Lawing to move ahead with his quest for more water, an issue that has elected council members facing growing concern among constituents.