

Ocean City residents breathing easier

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FORT WALTON BEACH — Linda Kopinski has lived on Tuxedo Drive in Ocean City since 1983, and nearly every day she has breathed the stench from the Garnier's wastewater treatment plant.

"It was bad, all day, all year around," she said as she sat at the dining table in her small, ranch house a few blocks from the sewage plant. "Even if everything was closed, you could still smell it. That's how bad it was."

Kopinski learned to keep her windows shut tight, her laundry off the clothesline and out-of-town guests well-prepared for the odor.

"I had company once, my in-laws from Chicago and a friend from South Carolina," she recalled. "They said, 'Linda, what's that smell? How do you stand that?' I was so ashamed. ... My in-laws don't come back any more."

But the days of dreading a strong breeze are over for Kopinski and her neighbors. The wastewater plant is scheduled to be demolished by November 2010 and replaced by a neighborhood park.

The Garnier's plant was taken off line two weeks ago. Now, most of south Okaloosa County's sewage is being treated at the new \$48.5 million Arbennie Pritchett Water Reclamation Facility, said Jeff Littrell, director of the county's Water and Sewer Department.

Sewage is still being pumped through the Garnier's plant on its way to the new facility on Eglin Air Force Base land. Line stops are expected to be installed at Garnier's in the next two weeks, which will turn off the flow to the old plant for good.

"The plant is very old. It's in bad shape. We've known since 2001 that we're not going to keep it," Littrell said. "There will be no sadness (when the plant is demolished.)"

Years of complaints

A wastewater treatment plant has operated at the Garnier's site on Essex Road since 1965, Littrell said.

A developer built the original plant to serve the neighborhood. It was made of pre-constructed metal tanks that were hauled in on trucks.

In 1966, the developer turned the plant over to the county, which marked the beginning of the Water and Sewer Department.

Construction on the existing Garnier's plant was completed in 1971. At the time, the plant could treat 3 million gallons of sewage a day. Two expansions since then increased its capacity to 6.5 million gallons a day.

Demolition is expected to start in February 2010 and be completed in November.

The Garnier's plant, which sat next to the former Ocean City Elementary School, has been controversial for years.

Some residents and business owners say the smell was so bad because it was serving too many residents. Some say it was the type of chemicals used to treat the water.

Littrell said the odor was caused by two main compounds, hydrogen sulfide — a bacteria that develops in raw sewage — and mercaptans, which is produced when oxygen is replaced with sulfur.

"It's an old technology that is inherently smelly," he said. "It's hard to control the odors."

In any case, people who live and work in the neighborhood are glad to see it go.

"We're very happy that it's changing finally," said Joyce Baril, who lives on Tuxedo Drive. "It was hard. It would seep into your house when it was really bad. I know people who lived on Newport (Drive). They said they could literally smell it on their furniture."

Many residents say the closure and demolition is long overdue.

"We've pushed for this a long time," said Don Stillwell, who lives next door to Kopinski and has organized meetings and petitions through the years. "We went to every (County) Commission meeting. It's going to mean a lot this neighborhood."

Stillwell, who moved to Tuxedo Drive in 1965, has not smelled the stench in the past few weeks.

It's a nice change, he said.

Residents along Tuxedo are ready to celebrate.

"We've decided we're going to have a block party," Baril said. "We're going to give it six months to make sure it stays that way."

A neighborhood park

As the county prepares to accept bids for the plant's demolition, commissioners are drawing up plans to develop a park on the property.

"It's going to be along the lines of a neighborhood park," said Commissioner Don Amunds, whose district includes the property. "It won't be all filled up with ball fields."

County commissioners have approved \$100,000 to build the park.

Preliminary plans call for a walking trail, a large grassy area and fitness stations.

“We’ll have an entrance off of Manchester (Road) and Newport (Drive), so both communities can get to it,” Amunds said. “It belongs to the public.”

Amunds said he wants to use some of the outbuildings on the property for restrooms, a picnic area, an office for county workers and for a pump house for the park’s irrigation system.

“I think that whole area will be park-related,” Amunds said. “We’re recycling what we can because that saves us all money.”

He hopes to host a meeting in November to get input from residents about what they want for the park.

Amunds said he would like to see the park completed by the fall of 2010.

“We’ll have a picnic”

Residents aren’t the only folks happy to see the treatment plant shut down. Business owners are chiming in as well.

“I’m relieved,” said Bobby Rhodes, manager of the Thai Hut restaurant on Racetrack Road. “The smell is so horrible on a summer evening. Customers walk out of my restaurant and basically want to regurgitate, you know? It would just hit them in the face.”

Nancy Raines, a nail technician at a hair salon on Racetrack, said she has always wondered how homeowners near the plant could stand it.

“It’s very unpleasant. ... When I’m coming into work is when I smell it,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to live next to it if I had a house for sale.”

Kopinski and her late husband, Robert, considered moving as the smell worsened over the years, but could not afford it.

She now feels she finally has her house and large backyard back.

“I’m so excited that it’s closing,” Kopinski said. “We’ll have a picnic in the backyard. I’m going to put a clothesline up in the backyard like I used to.”

Daily News Staff Writer Wendy Victora contributed to this report.