

Wellington discusses whether to build horse waste collection site

WELLINGTON, Fla. - Wellington officials are exploring whether to get into the business of facilitating horse waste disposal, but the village is "many, many months away" from any final decision.

Council members received an update on the village's horse waste issues during a workshop Wednesday -- a discussion that sets the ground for future meetings with village committees and private stakeholders.

Horse waste has long been a discussion topic in Wellington. The village bills itself as the "winter equestrian capital of the world" and is home to as many as 12,000 horses during the peak season.

In recent years, the village has spent millions of dollars re-routing its plumbing system to reduce manure-laden run-off into the Everglades, and it enacted tighter regulations for horse owners to better comply with state and federal water-quality standards and to combat illegal dumping.

Problems now revolve around rising costs for haulers to dispose of the village's estimated 100,000 tons of horse waste every year, village officials said.

Although the problem itself is a private-sector one, village staff proposes that Wellington could take a "proactive role" in ensuring the waste continues to be disposed of properly in the long term.

One such option could be for the village to build and operate a central collection facility in Wellington, where haulers could drop off daily loads from some 600 farms in the village and private companies with a use for the waste -- such as sugar farms in the Glades -- could pick up the waste and take it away in bulk.

Village staff estimated it could cost about \$3.7 million to build such a facility. Annual operations costs of about \$820,000 could be covered through hauler and tipping fees, staff proposed.

No immediate decisions will be made on whether such a facility should be built, but in sharing their initial thoughts Wednesday, village council members seemed split on whether it was a good idea and whether the village should have a role in horse waste collection at all.

"The village doesn't own any horses. This is a product coming from private owners in Wellington," Councilwoman Anne Gerwig said. "You have to convince me this is a municipality issue."

Village Manager Paul Schofield agreed that the waste itself isn't the village's responsibility, but he said the village does have a stake in meeting and maintaining water-quality standards for residents.

A 1,000-pound horse alone produces 50 pounds of waste per day, so in total, staff estimates Wellington's equine population produces between 80,000 to 100,000 tons of waste each year -- including 90 tons of phosphorus, a pollutant to the Everglades.

Councilman Howard Coates argued that Wellington also has a long-term stake in satisfying the needs of the equestrian community. He said establishing a "safe, economical, environmentally acceptable" facility for residents to dispose of waste could be a means to do that.

"By dealing with the equestrian issues, it helps the village as a whole," Coates said, citing the far-reaching economic impact of Wellington's equestrian industry.

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