

Captiva Invasive Species Control Municipal Services Taxing Unit FAQs

What is a Municipal Services Taxing Unit?

Property owners in unincorporated Lee County who wish to implement special services or improvement projects to their neighborhood or community may petition the Board of County Commissioners to create a Municipal Service Taxing/Benefit Unit (MSTBU), a taxing authority, which has its own budget for both revenues and expenses. Its budget is approved at a public hearing

There are two general categories of MSTBUs:

- **Operation & Maintenance Projects (O&M)** -- An O&M project is **ongoing** and has its own budget for both revenues and expenses. This budget is determined by a volunteer committee of property owners in coordination with the MSTBU Coordinator and approved annually at a public hearing. (This is what is being proposed here.)
- **Capital Improvement Projects (CIP)** -- A CIP project is a **one-time-only** project typically to build or upgrade some part of the community infrastructure. The final cost of a CIP project is determined upon completion. The property owner has the choice to pay it off all at once or pay it back over a period of time.

Municipal Service Taxing Units (MSTU) are funded by the collection of ad valorem taxes. Ad valorem taxes are based on the assessed value of the subject property. That's what is being proposed here.

Municipal Service Benefit Units (MSBU) are funded by the collection of special assessments or charges. The assessment may be applied in a variety of ways: per linear foot of road frontage, per parcel or lot, per STRAP number.

Check the panel website for county Administrative Code 3-15 which details how units are formed, operated and dissolved.

What is the purpose of this specific unit?

As stated in the petition: "The purpose of the Unit is to control the population of green iguana and other invasive species on Captiva Island." The funds raised by this unit will initially be used to pay for a trapper to eradicate iguanas on the island, as well as to pay off the loan from Lee County that funded the first two years of trapping services.

How much will it cost the average property owner?

The proposed first-year budget is estimated to be \$57,558 per year requiring a millage rate of 0.0415, based on current property values. This millage equates to \$4.15 for every \$100,000 of taxable property value. The **average** taxable property value within the proposed Unit is \$1,269,511, which would equate to a tax of \$52.68 per year.

The budget for Year 1 includes two line items that will apply to this year only:

1) Funding to reimburse Lee County for the two year's worth of iguana control services it has committed to pay for, from Oct. 1, 2019 to Sept. 30, 2021.

2) Funding to create a \$15,000 cash reserve for the unit, which will be used in the future to mitigate any price increases year-to-year.

Once the cash reserve is funded, one estimate (assuming property values remain the same) show the millage in Year 2 potentially dropping to 0.0315, which would cost the aforementioned average property \$39.99 annually.

The, once the county reimbursement is fulfilled at the end of Year 5, the Year 6 millage (again, using the same taxable property values of today) could drop to 0.0225, which would cost the average property \$28.56 annually.

The calculations are shown in the spreadsheet on the panel website.

Remember, the only millage that can be accurately assessed is the Year 1 millage in the petition. Millages for future years would depend on the island overall taxable property value and the budget approved by the MSTU board and the county prior to the start of that fiscal year. If taxable property values go up, it would take a lower millage figure to generate the same amount of annual funding for the unit.

What does it take to get the unit approved and formed?

Formation requires the consent of 50%+1 of the property owners on Captiva. With 1,158 properties, that means owners representing 580 parcels must agree to assess their properties to form the unit.

Approval is indicated by owners returning a signed petition for each property agreeing to assess themselves as explained in the petition. Petitions that are not returned are the same as a NO vote for the petition, since it's the total number of properties that determine a majority – NOT the number of affirmative petitions returned.

The goal is to have petitions returned before April 1, 2021, so that the unit can be formed in time for the tax bills that are approved by the county commission in September 2021 and would go out to owners right after that.

Who runs the unit?

Ultimately, Lee County is responsible for collecting the taxes and hiring the contractors necessary to fulfill the unit's mission of eradication of invasive species. However, a volunteer five-member Advisory Committee made up of property owners within the unit is appointed by the county commission to review and recommend the annual budget. The Advisory Committee would be subject to the Sunshine Law and all meetings will be public and noticed seven days prior to the meeting. Check the panel website for the county Administrative Code 2-1 that outlines what MSTU committees do.

How long will the unit exist?

The unit would continue to operate as long as the Advisory Committee and the county commission determined it was necessary.

Is there a limit as to what property owners can be charged?

Yes. Florida statutes allow for a MSTBU millage cap of 10 mills (\$10 per \$1,000 assessed value). However, each unit may choose to impose a lower cap.

What happens if the MSTBU overspends its budget for O&M units? What if it underspends?

This will not happen. Once the budget has been spent, no more purchase orders can be written. A reserve fund must be a part of the budget, and this reserve can be used for emergencies. Any unspent taxes will be carried over to the next year's budget. All funds collected by an MSTBU stays within that unit.

The amount of taxes collected cannot be changed once it has been approved by the Board of County Commissioners at a public hearing. However, funds can be moved from one line item to another within the unit's budget.

Once I sign and return my petition, what happens next?

Once you return your signed petition(s) (one per property you own), they are collected and verified by the county. After a sufficient number (50%+1) of petitions approving the unit are in hand, county staff can put together the necessary paperwork to have the unit formed by the county commission and have its millage included in the next year's property tax assessment sent out by the Lee County Property Appraiser's office.

During this process, iguana trapping will continue on the island since the county agreed to fund the past two year's trapping services in anticipation of being reimbursed once the unit was formed.

What happens if the unit is not approved?

County funding ceases on Sept. 30, 2021, so if another funding source is not in place the trapping service likewise ends.

Why not just hire a trapper ourselves?

While it would seem simpler on the surface to do that, there are two important reasons why that's not necessarily the best answer:

1) **Funding:** An entity would need to pay for the trapper, at an estimated cost of \$25,000 annually. If the Community Panel were to take that on, it would need to seek donations to do so – which means the burden would fall on fewer people at a higher cost per person. If not enough money was donated to cover the service, trapping would have to be reduced or eliminated – which means potentially more iguanas.

2) **Access:** A privately funded trapper can only access those properties whose owners give him permission to enter. Iguanas, however, are not bound by the same rules... so removing one on your property won't help much if the iguanas on neighboring properties are left in place and wander over to your lot to lay eggs. But an islandwide unit would allow the trapper to access any property where iguana activity is seen... which leads to more effective eradication.

If I sign this petition, will the trapper have unlimited access to my property?

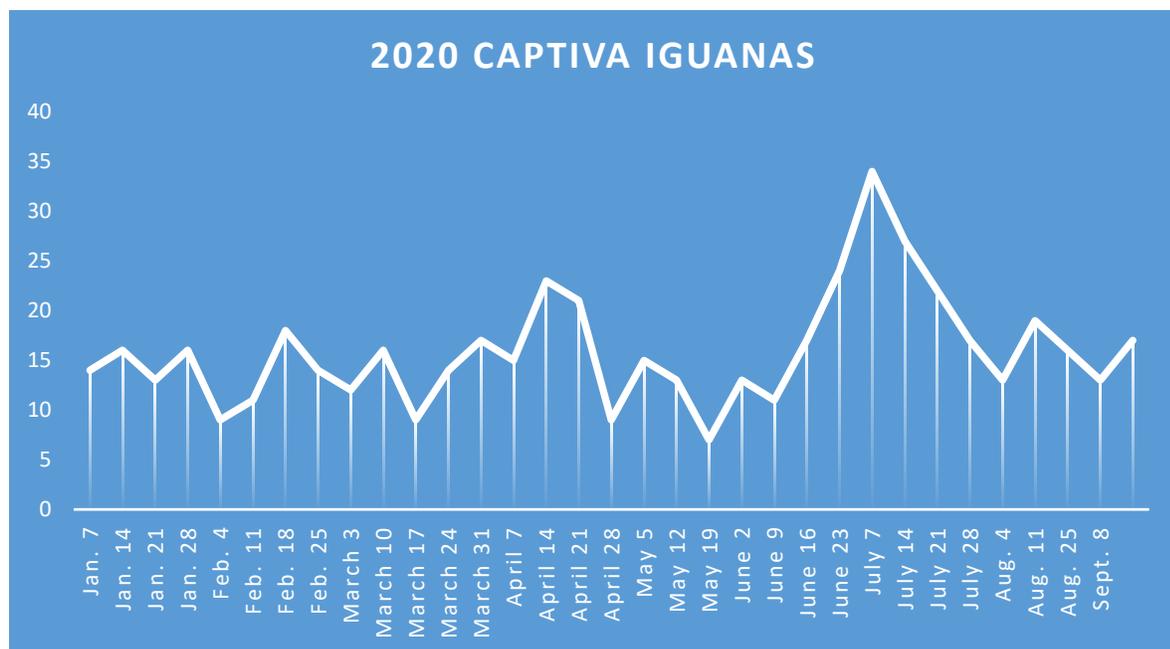
No. Once the unit is formed, you will then be asked to sign a form granting the trapper access to your property, if you don't sign, the trapper can't go on your property.

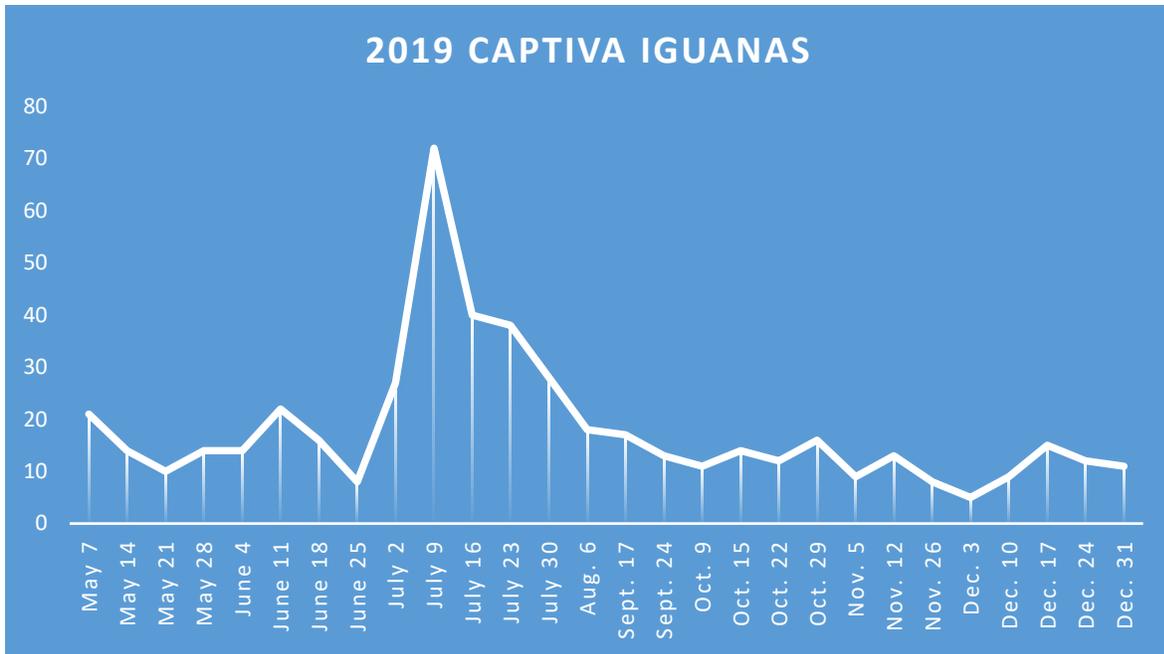
How bad is the iguana problem on Captiva?

Alfredo Fermin has been the island's trapper since May 2019, being funded first by the Community Panel and then by Lee County. During that time, he has removed more than 1,000 iguanas from the island – and that's just from the properties (approx. 125) he has permission to visit, NOT the entire island.

We charted his iguana captures here:

Iguanas removed from Captiva





Source: Alfredo Fermin, AAA Wildlife

Some speculate the iguana proliferation is tied to the loss of natural predators to keep the population under control. Until and if those predators could be re-established, removal or eradication is the only option.

Who do I call if I have any questions?

- Questions about the petition: Ken Gooderham, Captiva Community Panel administrator: (239) 938-6813 or captivacommunitypanel@gmail.com
- Questions about the MSTBU process: Josh Malo, Lee County MSTBU Coordinator: (239) 533-2308 or jmalo@leegov.com
- Questions about iguanas: Alfredo Fermin, trapper: (239) 440-7783 or AAAWildlife1@yahoo.com