

Town hall meeting to address Wabasso's needs

Residents cite the need for paved streets, street lighting, more sheriff's patrols, better housing -- and running water.

By Henry A. Stephens staff writer

WABASSO — Freeman Wiggs sat outside his home Friday afternoon in West Wabasso. His home was an Eagle Summit car, parked outside a 320-square-foot house on the unpaved 63rd Avenue. County records show the house was built in 1962.

"I bought this way back, about 30 years ago," Wiggs, 80, said of the house. "It was brand new."

Now its wood frame is falling apart, its outside paneling warped and peeling off, its door off the hinges and its roof collapsing — which Wiggs said prompted him to move into the car about four years ago.

Wiggs' living arrangement is just one of the challenges for sheriff's Detective Teddy Floyd and county Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Renk, who are trying to improve the area's conditions in a multi-agency project.

In a county that prides itself on a high quality of life, Renk and Floyd said, many residents aren't aware Wiggs' neighborhood exists.

But north of the beaten path of County Road 510, west of 58th Avenue, the roads are not paved and don't follow grids, instead meandering among the houses. There are no sidewalks or street lights.

"It's like going back in time," Renk said on an impromptu visit.

Renk said she has been working for the county Health Department since January on a \$30,000 federal grant to assess community problems and find money for solutions. She credited county Health Administrator Jean Kline and Environmental Health Manager Cheryl Dunn with obtaining the grant.

Renk has scheduled a town hall meeting to address community issues at 6 p.m. Monday at St. Matthew's Baptist Church on 64th Avenue.

Residents Friday cited the need for paved streets, street lighting, more sheriff's patrols, better housing — and running water.

Records at the county Property Appraiser's Office show Wiggs' house has three rooms, two of them bedrooms, but no bathroom. It has electricity but no running water.

"It's easy to get water," Wiggs said, adding that he buys it bottled from nearby stores.

Jean Williams, 71, said she got her 64th Court home connected to well water almost three years ago.

Town-hall meeting

- Time: 6 p.m. Monday.
- Place: St. Matthews Baptist Church, 8550 64th Ave., Wabasso.
- Purpose: To air community concerns to public officials and seek solutions.
- For details: County Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Renk, 794-7451.

West Wabasso numbers

- Population: 115 — 99 blacks and 14 whites.
- Age ranges: Eighty percent adult, 20 percent youth and children.
- Adult education levels: Fifty-seven percent of adults age 25 or older are high-school graduates.
- Median household income: \$6,250 per year.
- Median home value: \$29,400.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, demographic profile of 2000 for ZIP Code 32970

"I went down to the Health Department and got me some water," the Wabasso native said. "They said, 'You might as well get a well because there's no telling when you'll get (county) water through those trees.'"

Williams said her well water has a rusty color. It's fine for cleaning and bathing, she said. But like Wiggs and many others, she said, she buys bottled water for drinking and cooking.

"The county doesn't own a lot of these roads. They're private," Renk said. "So it's hard for the county to get the easements to run water lines here."

County Utilities Director Erik Olson said he plans to ask residents Monday if they will grant county easements for utilities. But even if they agree, he said, the county doesn't have the money to lay what his staff estimates will cost \$500,000 in water lines.

Olson said the county would have to get money from the Legislature next year to add the water lines.

Whatever all the county's various agencies can do, however, will be worth it, Floyd said.

"If they can have a quality of life in John's Island or the Moorings, they deserve it in this community," he said.

-