

Woman's work aids west Wabasso residents

By Henry A. Stephens
staff writer

WABASSO — David Godwin, a west Wabasso native and lifelong citrus worker for the Graves Brothers Co., looked out the window of his 63rd Court home.

"Oh, here comes trouble," he said, laughing, when he saw his visitor.

It was hardly trouble, though, in the paperwork that Julienne Renk brought to him.

Renk, an environmental health specialist with the Indian River County Health Department, brought permits from her agency to demolish a hurricane-beaten house he owned on County Road 510 at 58th Avenue.

Now all Godwin, 66, needed to do was pay \$50 for a separate demolition permit from the county Building Division and hire a contractor, Renk said.

"And the county has agreed to waive the landfill fees," she said.

Godwin has been busy repairing storm damage to his own home on 63rd Court since the hurricanes, replacing particle board with plywood.

He said the hurricanes left the small 58th Avenue house an eyesore, adding a fee waiver would allow his contractor son, Calvin, to demolish it without charge.

"This is fine, Julienne," Godwin said. "I sure do appreciate it very much, dear. You have been very much help here. They couldn't have picked a better person than you."

Nearby, neighbor Ardile Black, 89, had moved into a trailer provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and awaited county approval to have her hurricane-pounded home demolished.

But twice the electric service to the trailer has failed inspection, Renk said, preventing the house from being taken down.

"All they (electric contractors) have to do is move the meter over, from the house to the trailer," Renk said. "But we'll get it."

Black said other government workers have visited west Wabasso in prior years.

"But none like her," she said. "I don't know what I'd do without her. She is so nice."

Such expressions of appreciation are a common sound for Renk, 29, of Sebastian, as she checks in on the many west Wabasso residents she has come to know over the past year.

North of the beaten path of C.R. 510, west of 58th Avenue, the roads are not paved and don't follow grids, instead meandering among the houses. There are no sidewalks, street lights, water or sewer systems.

Renk started with the Health Department in January, assessing the community's many problems and seeking money for solutions.

The Health Department paid Renk from a \$30,000 state grant. That grant ends this month and can't be renewed. Godwin and Black said they hope Renk can stay on anyway.

She's a government employee, but residents see her more as a friend.

"She's a people person," Godwin said. "If it was just a government worker, I would've given up. ...We need a leader and this kid's a leader."

Since starting her job, Renk has convinced residents to grant easements to Florida Power & Light Inc. for street lights. Some light-pole locations are already staked out, including one near Black's house.

And county water and sewer are on the horizon. Of 59 water-sewer easements the county needs, Renk said, there are only 10 to go. County Utility Services Director Erik Olson can then seek aid from the Legislature to extend the lines.

Renk credited Olson, County Administrator Joe Baird, Public Works Director Jim Davis and Code Enforcement Officer Kelly Zedek with helping her improve the community. All she did, she said, was show residents who they could call for help. And there's more work to do, she said.

"There are a lot of things that aren't complete," county Environmental Health Manager Cheryl Dunn said.

So while the grant expires, Dunn said, the job won't end. The department is creating two new permanent positions for environmental health specialists, she said.

And Renk has the background to stay on in a job that will include monitoring swimming pools, septic tanks, institutional food service and similar concerns — with one or two days a week in west Wabasso.

"We're not abandoning the community," Dunn said. "We'll still be offering support, just not every day. ...She would broaden the scope of what she does, but still continue some time in west Wabasso."