

Indian River health officials receive national award

By Henry A. Stephens
staff writer

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — When county Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Renk first made contacts in west Wabasso in January 2004, she found a community seemingly neglected by county officials and much resentment for the lack of services.

But now there are restored lines of communication, private donations, streetlights, regular law enforcement, and projects to lay sidewalks and bring in county water lines — enough improvement to win the praise of a national health group.

Renk and her superiors, county Health Administrator Jean Kline and Environmental Health Director Cheryl Dunn, are scheduled to receive the Jim Parker Award next week from the National Association of City-County Health Officials.

"This makes us feel wonderful," Dunn said.

The award doesn't carry a cash prize, but does bring recognition in the field, she said.

She said state health officials in 2004 challenged health officials in Florida's counties to get more involved in communities. She said they submitted the Wabasso project to the national group as an example of doing that.

West Wabasso, an impoverished area north of County Road 510 and between 58th and 66th avenues, surprises many visitors with its stark contrast from the rest of the county's high quality of life.

In prior years, Dunn said, county agencies would visit west Wabasso, but not follow up. Renk followed up, she said, and inspired others to help out.

Typically, Dunn said, environmental health involves issuing permits for and monitoring septic tanks, wells and swimming pools.

"Instead of doing these routine things, we looked at larger issues and the needs of the community," she said.

That led to drug enforcement, streetlights, park pavilions and other things not usually thought of as health-related, she said.

Daniel Parker, the state's assistant environmental health director, praised the county for taking a \$30,000 state grant to hire Renk in 2004 and generating about \$1 million worth of community donations.

Pat Libbey, executive director of the national association, said the award, given since 1993, is named for the late Minnesota community health leader Jim Parker, who thought "outside the box."

"We had eight applications from across the country," Libbey said. "This Indian River project clearly stood out among all of them. ...Their leveraging of community support and going beyond the public sector is what caught our eye."

The Rev. Sylvester McIntosh, vice president of the West Wabasso Progressive Civic League, praised Renk's job in getting improvements started.

"They deserve every award they get," he said.

Renk shrugged off her role, saying others did most of the work and the award goes to the Health Department.

"The key is communication," she said. "I was just taking existing resources and putting people where they needed to go."

Parker said Renk, Dunn and Kline had such a working chemistry to propel the Wabasso project from an idea to reality.

"They helped get tangible issues addressed, to where the community can see this isn't just another survey," Parker said. "That project is a model for all of our folks."