

Residents oppose new concrete plant in Gifford

By Henry A. Stephens

GIFFORD — Residents are opposing a concrete company's plans for a new plant on 45th Street, asking officials to reverse their 2007 approval and rezone industrial parcels to keep future plants out of Gifford.

"My concern is for the young children," resident Donald Hart said Wednesday. "There are a lot of young children here, an elementary school and a middle school. And a concrete plant is going to give off dust and whatnot."

Hart is the Indian River-St. Lucie area director for the NAACP. He's the son of Victor Hart Sr., retired president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People River County chapter.

The younger Hart said current President Tony Brown, who couldn't be reached Wednesday, has prepared a petition for county residents to speak out against Prestige Concrete Products' planned batch plant on 9 acres at 5400 45th St.

And the Gifford Progressive Civic League recently asked county Community Development Director Bob Keating to rezone "all property currently zoned general industrial," which allows concrete plants, to light industrial, which no longer allows them.

"This proposed zoning change would prohibit similar development in the area and, hopefully, encourage light industrial development," league President Joe Idlette III wrote Sept. 15 in a letter to Keating.

Keating said such an action would be unfair to the existing junk yards, which need their general industrial zoning to operate. Rezoning land to lower intensity, against the property owner's will, could lead to lawsuits, he said.

Keating said he would put the issue before the County Commission on Nov. 10 after his staff researches it.

The Gifford outrage echoes that of Sebastian residents against Ocean Concrete's proposal for a plant on Old Dixie Highway south of the town.

But while Ocean Concrete has been so far rejected amid controversy, Prestige Concrete was approved quietly in June 2007. That's because the Gifford site was already zoned general industrial, Keating said. Ocean Concrete had light industrial zoning.

The difference means county planners could sign off on Prestige Concrete without any hearings — or notice of them — before the Planning and Zoning Commission, he said.

Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Price said she and residents found out about the concrete plant by accident in June while she was looking into drainage complaints on another property.

"It's surprising it was approved in 2007 but took this long to come to light," she said.

Prestige's project engineer, John MacGregor of Lakeland, said the plant was expected to add 15 jobs before the recession made the project itself a question.

Helene Caseltine, economic director for the county Chamber of Commerce, said the Prestige project never went before the Vero Beach-Gifford Enterprise Zone Development Agency for review. And in light of the objections, she said, the agency might not approve.

"We're all for job creation, but it has to be the right fit for the community," she said.