

West Ocala's health to get a close look

BY LASHONDA STINSON
STAFF WRITER

OCALA - In the last couple of years, west Ocala has entered into an era of change.

With the revitalization of the West Ocala Historic District, homes are springing up in the African-American community, residents are fixing up their homes and new infrastructure like sidewalks and streets lights have been built.

But local health officials believe redevelopment should be more than just bricks and mortar. Through a pilot program, the Marion County Health Department wants residents of the district to assess their environmental health, prioritize their issues and take action to address environmental concerns and improve the quality of life in the community.

The department plans to help residents do this through the Environmental Health Division's "West Ocala Historic Neighborhood PACE EH Project," a community-driven initiative that will help residents proactively look at their public health issues.

"This is tool that offers guidance in conducting community-based environmental health assessment and creating an accurate profile of the community's health status, said Samuél Brobbey Jr., senior health educator and PACE EH coordinator. "This is not a program where we group people together to come to the city and say we want money to address these problems. . . . The purpose of this program is to empower the grassroots community members themselves. It's not a hand-out to the community."

PACE EH is a methodology created by the National Association of County and City Officials and the National Center for Environmental Health, a branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevent. PACE EH stands for Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health.

Health department officials plan to hold a community meeting to discuss the program and gauge the environmental health concerns of the residents. The meeting is 6-7:30 p.m. Monday at Central Florida Community College's Hampton Campus.

But some residents can already pinpoint some problems.

Carleather Ponder, a Richmond Heights resident, said she is concerned with air quality and pedestrian safety, noting most of the sidewalks are on Northwest 14th Street.

"With the Royal Oak [charcoal] plant and the shavings plant, it is awful," she said. "The health concerns are just so much. Some days it's hard to breathe when you go outside. . . . It's time for them to start taking heed to our side of town. We can use a lot of improvements."

One resident - who wanted to remain anonymous - said the dilapidated homes that still sit on nearly every street in the historic district are an issue as well as the homeless people who loiter and live in them.

"I really don't have a lot of complaints except for the old abandoned homes that are just run down with the boards all up. They're an eyesore," she said. "And we're getting a lot of kids up in here and they don't have anything to do or anywhere to go. They need to focus on putting that playground back."

The playground she refers to is one that used to be on Northwest 10th Avenue. It is now a vacant lot with trees and aging tables and benches.

Tom Moore, director of the Health Department's Environmental Health Division, said choosing west Ocala as the pilot site falls in line with the area's revitalization efforts. He said the Health Department will facilitate or guide the initiative, but the residents will bring it to life.

"I want these people to tell me what their concerns are. We're ready to listen and do what we can to help resolve some of these issues. If we all sit down and talk, then maybe we can pool our knowledge and resources together find a way to address and improve their issues," Moore said. "We're there to stir the interest and to stir the enthusiasm and have the people solve their own problems."

The objectives of this project, Brobbey said, are to mobilize the community and build coalitions; educate the community and together identify and reduce environment health hazards; and empower the community by designing a system for them to address their own problems in suitable ways.

Bryant Harris, 21, believes the overgrowth of the trees in the neighborhood restricts the view of drivers and pedestrians.

"It's kind of bad," he said. "You can barely see the cars when you come from around the corner."

There are 13 tasks that encompass the PACE EH program, such as forming a community environmental health assessment team, creating a health issues list and developing health indicators.

"It helps the grassroots community to come together and lead them through a process of assessing their environmental health conditions," Brobbey said. "One neat thing about this program is that it is not a linear process. . . . You jump from task five to task one and come back to number two."

Nationwide, about 40 to 80 communities working with the PACE EH program. Bernalillo County in New Mexico used the process to help develop an environmental health report card for community members and policy makers about the environmental health status and conditions.

The Florida Department of Health currently has 20 counties using the PACE EH process. Polk County was the pilot. The department's Division of Environmental Health has provided \$500,000 in grants as seed money to get the program started at county health departments. The Marion County Health Department received \$30,000.

Daniel Parker, assistant division director, said the program empowers communities, citing PACE EH programs in Polk County and Indian River County. In Indian River County, the PACE EH process is working in a community called Wabasso, where residents live in "third world conditions," said Julianne Renk, environmental specialist with the Indian River County Health Department.

Through PACE EH, a water project has been presented to the county. The program is seeking funding to extend drinking water lines and improve public access for maintenance and emergency vehicles.

"We have been pushing to use PACE in communities for a long time," Parker said. "We want to help folks rebuild their communities and help point them in the right direction to find help to address their environmental health concerns, but ultimately we want the communities to take ownership of what their issues are."

Brobbey said west Ocala is just the beginning and the department hopes to replicate the program across other communities in Marion County.

"When we move on to another site to initiate this program, what we want to see is a community that is able to take the initiative and come together to address whatever concerns they may have," he said.