

Unkempt properties, pollution cited in west Ocala survey

OCALA - Uncared-for property and air contamination were identified as the leading health concern and hazards by the 392 people on Ocala's west side who completed environmental health surveys facilitated by the Marion County Health Department Division of Environmental Health.

"The purpose is to have the community identify environmental health hazards and develop community-based driven action plans to address those issues," said Samuel Brobbey Jr., senior health educator/Protocol for Assessing Community excellence in Environmental Health coordinator for the county health department, about the survey. "The assessment team will meet and decide what the appropriate steps are."

There were two sample surveys, a long one and a short one. Out of 2,000 long surveys distributed, 392 were returned. Out of 300 short surveys distributed, 67 were returned.

The survey report shows that uncared-for property is rated the largest environmental concern that most affected the community, and air contamination is considered the largest health issue. A lesser-rated concern is inadequate lighting, but it is a concern nevertheless.

Don Williams, who lives in Happiness Homes, said the soot from the charcoal plant is a concern to him.

"You can see it in the eaves," Williams said, pointing to his home. He said soot collects on the window screens.

"This little black stuff, the only place it comes from is burning the charcoal and stuff like that," he said. He said the wind often blows from west to east, but he has noticed lately that it is blowing east to west, bringing smoke from a nearby charcoal plant.

"Sometimes you can smell the smoke in the air," he said.

James Crawford takes care of land across from the charcoal plant. He does not live steadily in the area but comes and goes as part of his maintenance schedule. He said the cars sometime have soot on them.

"To me, it's no big deal," Crawford said. "I haven't had a problem."

He believes any concern about the charcoal plant could be driven by political pressures. He said developers are looking to build housing in the area and the charcoal plant might be considered an eyesore that could depress property values.

"Do I move in and then try to close it down?" he asked about a plant. "I don't think that's right. You have the option when you are looking," he said about moving into the area where a plant already exists.

Ocala City Councilwoman Mary Rich lives a few blocks from the charcoal plant.

"We felt for years that there was air pollution out here with the charcoal plant, but we have had tests done" Rich said. The state Department of Environmental Protection monitored the plant and found it was in compliance and the particulate matter fell within acceptable levels.

"They have a permit that they can emit so many particles in the area," Rich said about the plant. "I don't know if anybody can prove that they got sick."

Gwen Leverette said she was concerned about empty lots and abandoned homes all through the area.

"It makes the neighborhood look ugly," said Leverette, who was standing off Southwest Seventh Avenue on Saturday afternoon. "The addicts do break into them and live in there - do their bowel movements in there. It's a hazard."

She also said people abandon dogs and cats.

"They don't care for them and they don't clean up neither," Leverette said. She is the owner of a new Habitat home, and said she is trying to clean up the neighborhood.

"They need to do something about the old houses. They have roaches and rats." But she said the westside is beginning to "look up" and she is proud to live there.

Chiquita Martin said some of the empty lots could be cleaned up and used for parks for children.

"They have to play in the road," Martin said. "That's not safe in the road."

The survey area was bounded by Northwest 27th Avenue on the west to Pine Avenue on the east, and from State Road 200 on the south to Northwest 28th, Northwest 31st and Northwest 35th streets on the north.

The report was a collaboration between community members who came together to form a Community Environmental Health Assessment Team and the health department, and was part of the PACE EH process.

A meeting is scheduled to discuss the report at the next PACE EH meeting on Monday at 6 p.m. at the Lillian Bryant Center, 2200 N.W. 17th Place, Ocala.