

COMMUNITY, CITY LAUNCH CAMPAIGN

## Coat of charcoal

Residents concerned with soot from Royal Oak

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THE STAR-BANNER

OCALA - Down the street from Ruth Reed's northwest Ocala home stands her neighborhood's longtime nemesis, the Royal Oak charcoal plant.

Reed and her family have lived in their home since the early 1960s, about 20 years before the plant opened. Since then, she said, soot from the plant has showered down on her family's cars, coated her house and plants, and infiltrated their home, dirtying the windows, blinds and the filter to the air conditioner.

"It coats everything," Reed said. "We have to keep everything closed up 24 hours a day."

Tuesday, Reed and the other members of the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala community organization found an ally in the Ocala City Council. After a lunch hour discussion with the neighborhood group, the council decided to launch a letter writing campaign blanketing state and federal regulatory agencies, state legislators and congressional delegates with demands to keep a closer eye on potential air pollution from the plant.

"I think we need to take the pit bull approach," Councilman Mike Amsden said.

Council President Kyle Kay said the letters would "let Royal Oak know we are going to be watching you, not just the neighbors, but the city side."

It is a road both Reed's neighborhood and the city administration have been down before. In 1996, the city administration paid the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to conduct six months of air quality tests. The DEP concluded the charcoal plant posed no health risk.

Amsden, who was on the council then, said that still frustrates him.

"Who are we kidding?" he asked. "It is so subjective when you do those tests, as we found out last time. It was almost a mockery of what we were trying to do. It (soot) was in their homes, and they are not over there barbecuing indoors."

Amsden said DEP officials should go house to house to see the soot neighbors live with. City Manager Paul Nugent said the council could fund another air monitoring test, but suggested an independent firm conduct it instead of DEP.

Robert Lockett, a spokesman at Royal Oak's Georgia home office, said any air quality tests would show the plant conforms with clean air and environmental laws.

"In general, I can tell you we do not only meet the DEP guidelines down there, we strive to do better than them," Lockett said of the Ocala plant, the company's lone Florida facility. "In terms of this specific meeting, I can tell you whenever someone from the neighborhood raises an issue, we work to address it. We strive to have good relations with the surrounding community."

Jeanne Zokovitch, an attorney with Wild Life, a nonprofit environmental organization offering pro bono assistance to the neighborhood group, acknowledged that research of DEP files showed the plant was in compliance with the law. But Zokovitch questioned the accuracy of the current monitoring system, which she described as an honor system in which a specially trained Royal Oak employee steps outside to do a visible check of the emissions from the plant and then forwards results to DEP.

"If you look at the records, they are in compliance," Zokovitch said. "But if you don't trust the form of monitoring, are they truly in compliance?"

Zokovitch also urged the council to consider limiting the hours of the charcoal plant, which is now allowed to run 24 hours a day under city law. She maintained that move would lead to a more accurate measure of possible air pollution.

"Royal Oak has a long history of increasing production during nighttime hours," Zokovitch said. "There's a primary purpose. You have DEP from Orlando monitoring them. How often is someone going to travel up here from Orlando at 2 a.m. to check emissions?"

Reed said neighbors are researching to see if there is medical evidence of any health problems directly linked to the charcoal plant.

A spokesperson from the DEP Orlando district office could not be reached for comment.