

OUR OPINION

## Editorial: Once they are heard, they roar

Not only has the Neighborhood Citizens group not ceased its fight, it has stepped up its activity.

It may have taken the better part of a decade for residents of northwest Ocala to get government's ear regarding the unhealthy and intrusive pollution caused by the Royal Oak charcoal plant, but now that government is listening, the people are making their case loud and undeniably clear.

In an inspiring display of citizen mobilization, homeowners surrounding the charcoal plant banded together last year as the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala after area residents scored a victory to keep the city from selling off Pine Oaks Golf Course to a food distribution company. Pine Oaks sits across from the charcoal plant. Energized by that civic victory, the group decided to try once again to tackle the Royal Oak health hazard that has plagued the neighborhood for some 30 years.

Petitioning the city of Ocala and the state, the neighbors' group sought serious and verifiable air tests to confirm what everyone already knew — that Royal Oak was blanketing the neighborhood with soot on a regular basis. Such tests had been conducted in the past but without adequate monitoring or follow-up. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection gave the residents' concerns lip service and not much else until the city, led by City Manager Paul Nugent, applied unyielding pressure last year. The resulting findings constituted a long list of suspected environmental violations that led to the announcement by Royal Oak that it will close the plant come February.

End of story, right? Not for the neighborhood residents who have heard too many unfulfilled promises about Royal Oak in the past. Not only has the Neighborhood Citizens group not ceased its fight, it has stepped up its activity.

The group has joined forces with the national, nonprofit environmental concern WildLaw and formed, in conjunction with Neighborhood Citizens, something called the Northwest Ocala Bucket Brigade. Brigade members are using household items like sheets to measure the presence of the soot pollution that has for so long offended that section of the city. Collected particulates will be sent to the National Bucket Brigade Coalition for testing.

We know Royal Oak has said it is departing, but like members of Neighborhood Citizens and WildLaw, the pollution associated with that plant has been so offending for so long that there is no longer any room to take chances. If Royal Oak, for whatever reason, should change its mind, something still must be done about its menacing soot. And having quantifiable evidence, like the Bucket Brigade is gathering, in hand will be invaluable for the health and well-being of northwest Ocala.

Ruth Reed has been the driving force behind the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala and, now, the Northwest Ocala Bucket Brigade. The efforts and successes of these groups are uplifting examples of what people can accomplish once they have government's support.

People power. It's a beautiful thing.