

Ocala may inspect Royal Oak site

Brownfields program offers service for free Royal Oak has not yet responded to offer

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OCALA — The City of Ocala has invited the Royal Oak charcoal company to join a program offering free inspections of old industrial or commercial land that might be contaminated.

George Roberts, coordinator of the city's brownfields program, Renew Ocala, sent a letter to Royal Oak's Georgia headquarters after the company announced that it would close its Ocala manufacturing plant by the end of February. Roberts said he has not received a response back and, since the program was completely voluntary, the decision to join rested with Royal Oak or a future owner.

"If that property does go up for sale, chances are the people who buy it will want an environmental assessment on it," Roberts said during a discussion of Royal Oak at Thursday morning's Ocala Brownfield Advisory Board meeting.

He said a letter of invitation to the brownfields program is routine when a property might be put up for sale that housed an industrial or commercial use that may have caused contamination. Typical brownfields sites include closed gas stations, dry cleaners and auto repair garages.

Ocala Brownfield Advisory Board member Ron Thibodeaux, also vice president for business development of the Ocala/Marion County Economic Development Corporation, said it was important to study and clean up any potential soil and ground contamination at the Royal Oak site, 1921 N.W. 17th Place, because its heavy industrial zoning made it a valuable and rare commodity in Ocala.

"It's not the most attractive piece of property, but we wanted to make sure an employee base went in there when they (Royal Oak) left," Thibodeaux said.

But neighbors in the residential area south of Royal Oak have gone to the Ocala City Council several times with concerns that their community is inundated with industrial sites. While uses such as an automobile wrecking yard, electronics assembly, warehouses and light manufacturing businesses are allowed in the current heavy industrial zoning category. But if a new owner wanted to open another charcoal plant, for example, a special exception from the Board of Adjustment would be required.



James Allen, president of Roswell, Ga.-based Royal Oak could not be reached for comment Thursday about whether the company still plans to close the Ocala location at the end of February.

Royal Oak announced in December it was closing its Ocala plant because of rising operational costs and environmental issues related to the poor quality of wood available for manufacturing. The announced closing came after neighboring residents and the city started urging elected officials and regulatory agencies to monitor the plant more closely.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection then launched an investigation into potential violations.