

Royal Oak says no to pollution inspection

Company won't enroll site in brownfields program.

CHRISTOPHER CURRY
STAR-BANNER

OCALA - Royal Oak Enterprises has declined the city's offer of a free environmental site inspection for its charcoal manufacturing facility in Ocala.

Renew Ocala, a local extension of the federally created "brownfields" program, would have contracted with a private consultant to do soil boring and other tests if Royal Oak had volunteered to enter the Ocala plant site, 1921 N.W. 17th Place, into the program.

The brownfields program is not intended to lead to environmental enforcement or regulatory action, Renew Ocala coordinator George Roberts said. Instead, it determines if there are any contamination or pollution problems at a former industrial or commercial site that need to be cleaned up so another business can move in.

Robert Lockett, chief financial officer of Roswell, Ga.-based Royal Oak, turned down the city's offer in a letter to the city dated Jan 11. Lockett wrote that, while the brownfields program was a "worthy project that will provide significant benefits to the people of Ocala . . . We are not aware of any reason why the Ocala facility would warrant a 'brownfields' designation."

"I'm sure that any business that goes in there will approve it (the brownfields program), if they sell the property," said City Councilwoman Mary Sue Rich, who sits on the city's Brownfield Advisory Board. "It's good to know if there is any contamination."

Rich said she was not sure what type of business would be best to succeed Royal Oak at the location.

"I know it should not be a charcoal plant," she said.

In the letter to the city, Lockett reiterated that Royal Oak would shut down the Ocala plant. In early December, the charcoal manufacturing giant, announced plans to close down the facility at the end of February.

The announcement came shortly after the Department of Environmental Protection launched a review of potential permit violations discovered in a site inspection. That DEP site inspection took place after neighboring residents and city officials joined in a campaign to urge elected officials and regulatory agencies to more closely monitor the plant.

Jeff Prather, spokesman for the DEP office in Orlando, said the investigation of potential violations was ongoing.

"Just because they are closing down doesn't mean we won't go ahead with the enforcement action," Prather said.

He said DEP will do a facility inspection after Royal Oak leaves, but typically does not conduct soil boring or related site tests.