

Ocala to fund charcoal plant emission tests

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THE STAR-BANNER

OCALA - From a charcoal plant spouting soot to cars speeding down a neighborhood street, some northwest Ocala residents brought their quality-of-life concerns to the City Council on Tuesday night.

They found a receptive audience.

The council voted to provide free electric utility service and secure fencing for Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Environmental Protection Agency air monitoring equipment to measure emissions from the Royal Oak charcoal plant at 1921 N.W. 17th Place. The unanimous vote came with a caveat that the city's cost not exceed \$3,500.

Then, a contingent of Northwest 14th Street residents got some good news about speeding problems on their road, which runs north of Howard Middle School. In another unanimous vote, the council decided to go out to bid on portable rubber speed humps the city can install on residential streets before permanent speed tables can be built. "They're interim, waiting on the design and permitting to be done on permanent ones," City Engineer Bruce Phillips.

The city expects \$20,000 will get enough speed humps to slow traffic on four roadways at once. Last March, the council voted down similar portable speed humps, when the cost was \$47,000.

Northwest 14th Street, Southeast 14th Avenue and Northeast 12th Avenue are three roads likely to see the temporary devices, because permanent speed humps are under design for each road. Another eight streets are under consideration.

"Fourteenth Street borders Howard Middle School, we have a lot of children coming along there," resident Juanita Cunningham said. "We appreciate you paving the street, but when you paved the street it became a speed zone."

Meanwhile, the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala won the council's support for environmental monitoring of Royal Oak, even though the Georgia-based charcoal manufacturer plans to close its Ocala plant at the end of February. Jeanne Zokovich, an attorney with nonprofit environmental group WildLaw, said the DEP and EPA had still consented to do testing and residents would finally have scientific evidence if the plant produced health risks during its 30 years of operation.

Councilman Kent Guinn questioned if this was just "piling on" since the plant was closing anyway or if the tests were intended to support some future lawsuit the neighbors might file against Royal Oak.

Zokovich said her organization does not handle lawsuits seeking monetary damages from businesses.

"I don't think whatever we get out of this monitoring is enough for some attorney to come down here and make a windfall on this," she said. "That's not why the community or I have asked for this monitoring."

Guinn did join the rest of the council in the unanimous vote to provide utility and phone lines and security fencing for the monitoring equipment.