

Residents of Hobe Sound's Gomez neighborhood address concerns

A community team is making sure that issues such as fire hydrants and quality water will be resolved

By MEGAN KENNY

HOBE SOUND — When Douglas Miller moved into the Gomez neighborhood in 1939, it didn't have paved roads or electricity, but street lamps and sand roads covered with straw to keep wheels from sinking.

Today, all of the 50 to 60 residents have power but remain on well water, Miller said. For years, they wondered how to change the situation, especially because it made having fire hydrants impossible.

Enter the Martin County Health Department.

Through a grant from the Florida Department of Health, local health officials began organizing the neighbors in January to address residents' concerns about their neighborhood.

The project, called the Gomez Community-Based Environmental Health Assessment Team, is made up of residents and health department officials who work as liaisons between Gomez and other county officials. They meet twice monthly.

"The idea is traditionally in public health, everyone's an expert and they want to come in and tell people what they want them to do," said Sheila Robusky, a strategic planning coordinator for the health department. "People have a much better idea what's good for their neighborhood than we give them credit for."

Residents came up with about 20 issues, and the group decided to focus on four: lack of fire hydrants, quality of well water, vacant houses and speeding.

Ken Wilson, assistant director of utilities at South Martin Regional Utility, was invited to a meeting to tell residents the cost of getting off the wells — and thus sustain fire hydrants.

It was too expensive, so the idea was dropped.

"We facilitate that, we don't solve the problems," Robusky said. "We organize meetings, have people come in." Health department officials were brought in, tested 10 wells and found them all safe.

"The funny thing is though, when you test people's well water and it meets scientific requirements, if it smells rotten or tastes rotten — it's still bad," Robusky said.

At a Nov. 28 meeting, Commissioner Lee Weberman promised to dedicate some of his personal budget for signs that would welcome passersby to the Gomez neighborhood.

Robusky said she and the project's other coordinators were pointed to the neighborhood by Bob Washam, county environmental health director, who had inspected the neighborhood's septic system.

"It's an old neighborhood, but people took pride in it and took care of it," Robusky said.

Gomez is a small neighborhood in Southeast Martin County with old houses and neat lawns. Many of the streets in the neighborhood are named after longtime residents, leading to another problem. Miller said one of those streets, Lundy Street, was renamed London Street by the county.

"What I think it was, someone just pronounced it like that, and they thought we meant 'London,' and it was spelled wrong," Miller said. But he said he remembers "old

man" Lundy, who died in the 1940s, and his family quite well. Miller's father used to drive Lundy around, he said.

Weberman is helping to get the name changed back, Robusky said.

Miller, now 74, returned to the neighborhood to be with his mother after serving in the Air Force from 1952 to 1963. He's seen changes in the neighborhood but thinks it's now changing for the better.

People were wary of the group at first, Miller said, because "you never know if you're wasting your time." But it's been a help, he said.

The best part of the meetings is everyone has phone numbers of people in charge, he said.

Miller is one of the few old-timers remaining, since many of those who were the backbone of the community have died.

"It's kind of late for me," he said. "If I was younger after my mother passed, I would have left. Now, I think I'm staying put."