

Polk wins grant for health study

By ANN-MARIE NEWMAN

WINTER HAVEN -- The Polk County Health Department will use a \$20,000 grant it received recently to study the environmental health in an area north of U.S. Highway 92 between Auburndale and Lakeland.

The grant, awarded by the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), is a joint project between NACCHO and the National Center for Environmental Health of the Center for Disease Prevention and Control.

The project is known as PACE-EH, or Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health, and works to help local health and government officials plan a community-based environmental assessment.

Once an assessment has been made, PACE-EH then helps community members take action to clean up any problems that could affect the health of residents.

"This a systematic way a community can go from recognizing problems to solving problems," said Dr. Daniel Haight, director of the Polk County Health Department. "Such problems could be code enforcement issues, pests and vermin issues and possibly poor lighting or lack of safe parks, for example."

Polk County was one of eight demonstration sites selected across the country to implement the project. Once the project is complete, Polk County will serve as a model for other communities facing environmental health issues.

Haight said the Polk County Health Department selected an area of Polk known as the Combee Settlement area because local health, city and county officials have already begun working toward improving health of area residents.

"This grant was awarded to a community that has pulled itself together and has some type of organization to address different environmental health problems the community faces," Haight said. "The PACE-EH project is basically taking this community's good organization skills, which is why we won the grant, and giving it a structure to address the different problems."

Since the project is community-driven, the health department will serve only as a facilitator for this process and provide technical assistance.

A team of business leaders, local government officials and others in the general community will lead the process through a series of 13 action steps over the next 18 months, said Haight.

"There is a list of steps provided for the community to follow and this list will act as a guide," he said. "Once we do it here, then other communities can see how we were successful."

For more information about the PACE-EH project, call the Environmental Health Division of the Polk County Health Department at 519-8330.