

Lakeland Ledger, Tuesday, January 13, 2004

Panel OKs Help for Combee Residents

By Tom Palmer
The Ledger

LAKELAND -- State and local officials agreed Monday to help North Combee Road area residents get a sidewalk and street lights.

A delegation led by state Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, met at Combee Elementary School with members of the Combee Settlement Committee, which was formed last May to work on neighborhood issues.

"We want it to be safe, that's all," said Tom Parrotte, one of the committee's organizers.

Parrotte and other residents sported T-shirts that read "Combee Area Revitalization Effort."

Ben Walker, planning and liaison manager at the Florida Department of Transportation's district office in Bartow, said preliminary estimates show the sidewalk project from U.S. 92 to Saddle Creek Road would cost \$1 million.

The money is not budgeted in the current five-year road budget, but he said because this is a safety project, additional money may be available.

Dockery said she could try to obtain additional funds in the upcoming session of the Legislature, but cautioned residents that if some unanticipated problems arise, such as difficulty getting drainage permits, the money can't be spent until the problems are resolved.

Walker did not have an estimate on the cost of street lights, but he said it would be considerably less than sidewalks and could proceed sooner because it would not involve permitting or extensive engineering.

"We will look for money," he said.

As residents peppered Walker and others with comments and technical questions about the project, he told them to concentrate on what they want for their community and leave the engineering details to him and his staff.

He said although DOT can install the lights, it will up to the County Commission to agree to pay the maintenance costs.

Walker said it will help in the meantime for residents to contact local officials, because transportation budget decisions are made by the Transportation Planning Organization, a panel of local elected officials that includes the County Commission and members of the Lakeland City Commission.

Gloria Graham, a Polk County Health Department employee who has been acting as the committee's facilitator, said the possibility of widening Combee Road to four lanes has been discussed.

She said many residents concluded that could increase traffic, destroy local businesses and seriously alter the community.

There are no plans to widen Combee Road, Lakeland planner Chuck Barmby told the group, explaining a study done about 10 years ago concluded the cost of buying right of way and paying business damages would probably make the project fiscally impractical.

Monday's meeting followed a meeting involving Dockery, state Rep. John Stargel, R-Lakeland, and DOT just before Christmas to discuss the specifics of the committee's request that came up at a public meeting late last year.