

## Health Program to tackle Coyote Landfill

By Mike Odom, Navarre Press

The days of noxious fumes blowing off the Coyote Landfill through the homes of nearby residents and contamination of their well water could be numbered.

An organizational meeting of the first PACE-EH (Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health) pilot program in the county gave a forum to local residents to air their grievances about the most pressing environmental health problems in the Holley-Navarre area.

“We’re going to come up with one main concern and attack it aggressively,” said Brande Kempf, the PACE coordinator for the Santa Rosa County Health Department, which received a \$20,000 grant to run the year-long program. Kempf said the program helps local communities develop effective plans for the problems they confront – and that there can be power in their numbers when working together strategically.

Every person in the audience who spoke Thursday night, May 25, at Navarre United Methodist Church talked about the health problems possibly caused by the construction and demolition landfill located a few miles north of US 98 and east of State Road 87 in Navarre.

They described a foul odor that made them nauseous and caused respiratory problems. They cited water sampling tests that showed contamination of wells with benzene, arsenic and other toxic chemicals. They said water used as drinking water for horses and pets had caused illness and death in some of those animals. They raised concerns about wildlife exposed to the water in the landfill pit and to the fumes.

They talked about how they believed the landfill had been accepting materials they believed illegal for that kind of landfill, such as blue plastic tarps and treated wood after the hurricane waste from the storms of 2004 and 2005. They talked about how the problems really started showing up after the landfill caught on fire last fall.

They also talked about how they had been unable to get any help from local, state or federal public health, environmental protection or elected officials.

Kempf said she wished the Florida Department of Environmental Protection had accepted her invitation and attended the meeting.

“I appealed to a lot of agencies. But they ignored my e-mails,” she said.

The only official representative who attended – other than the county DOH Administrator and senior staff and speakers from the University of West Florida and The Zoo in Gulf Breeze – was Ken Walker, general manager of the Holley-Navarre Water District.

He talked about the threats the landfill posed to the aquifer, which supplies drinking water for the local water system, if the problems at the landfill were not dealt with before contamination occurred. A DOH staff person noted that drinking water for residents living near the landfill is from the local water system and not well water.

Less than 20 residents attended the meeting. But almost half that number spoke when Kempf opened the floor for comments. She explained that their goal that night was to select a single issue to work on if possible.

Kempf said it seemed clear what their issue should be – the Coyote Landfill – after hearing the group speak heatedly and with one voice about the problems they experienced living near it.

She said the next meeting would be to develop a steering committee of about 12 to 15 people. Some members in the audience were concerned that the public had not received

enough notice about that night's meeting, or they thought many more people would have attended. A commitment was made by many attendees to help advertise the second meeting.

PACE-EH is a program developed by the Centers of Disease Control in association with the National Association of County and City Health Officials. There are PACE-EH programs through the country. But Florida has the most and the state's DOH has a long history with the project, "dating back to membership on the project's steering committee in the mid-1990s," according to information on the state Department of Health Web site.

"PACE is a great assessment tool," said Julianne Price, an environmental specialist with the Indian River County Department of Health in a phone interview from Vero Beach on the eastern coast of Florida. She has also been the PACE-EH coordinator in that county since 2004.

"Instead of the government going into a community and saying what needs to be done, it's all about what the community thinks needs to be done," she said. "But it seems like it hasn't always occurred to governmental agencies to do that. Instead of telling what they want, why not ask them?"

Price said that the steering committee of local residents, which becomes the core operating group of the PACE program, identified the problems of no street lights, abandoned houses and no water service as the most pressing "environmental public health problems broadly conceived" in the predominantly black and low income community where they are working.

"Whatever the community identifies as problems, we work with them to develop action plans," she said of how the PACE program works.

She said the work of the past two years has resulted in positive action in all of those areas identified, including a pending appropriation of \$842,000 and plans to connect the area to the local water system.

The second meeting of the local PACE-EH program is 6:30 p.m., Tuesday, June 6, at the Holley-Navarre Water District offices. For more information, contact Brande Kempf in the Gulf Breeze office of the county Department of Health at 934-5177 or [brande\\_kempf@doh.state.fl.us](mailto:brande_kempf@doh.state.fl.us).

The meeting is open to the public and residents are encouraged to attend, Kempf said.