

## Healthy Gulf

# Environmental organization works with Siesta

## Siesta Key Association sponsors a community meeting featuring a new environmental organization

By Kevin J. Allen, City Editor

A national organization is working with Sarasota County to improve the area's environmental health. The Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health is a process aimed at solving environmental health problems through a collaborative effort between all interested parties.

The group is comprised of government employees, citizens, non-profit organizations, environmental groups and educational institutions.

The Sarasota Coastal Communities chapter began meeting in November 2005. It was introduced at a May 22 meeting on Siesta Key, sponsored by the Siesta Key Association and the Sarasota County Health Department.

Charles Henry, environmental administrator for the Sarasota County Health Department, gave the crowd an overview of the organization and its mission. The group aims to identify local environmental issues, provide a unified voice for the community regarding the issues, and to create action plans to remedy them.

"It's a collaborative community effort," Henry told the crowd. "That's why meetings like this are so important."

Attendees brainstormed a list of the environmental problems affecting the county. The list included such hot-button issues as red tide, watershed management, mercury levels, sewage spills and pesticide usage.

The meeting featured keynote speaker Andrew Reich, coordinator of the state's Aquatic Toxins Program. Reich spoke about the many problems affecting Sarasota County's waterways.

He focused most of his attention on red tide. He said that red tide has been affecting the Gulf of Mexico for many years, but recent studies are focusing on whether the outbreaks are larger, more intense and more frequent. To that end, his organization studies water samples, marine life and the affect red tide has on humans.

Reich also touched on blue-green algae, a problem that has begun to affect Sarasota County.

### PROTOCOL

The Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health uses a 13-step strategy to address local environmental issues:

1. Determine community capacity
2. Define and characterize the community
3. Assemble a community-based environmental health assessment team
4. Define the goals, objectives, and scope of the assessment
5. Generate a list of community-specific environmental health issues
6. Analyze the issues with a systems framework
7. Develop locally appropriate indicators
8. Select standards against which local status can be compared
9. Create issue profiles
10. Rank the issues
11. set priorities for action
12. Develop an action plan
13. Evaluate progress and plan for the future