

Groups enlist residents to help revive Wabasso

Grant, plans aim to improve quality of life

BY LINDA JUMP
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WABASSO -- A generation ago, this was a thriving, citrus-based neighborhood. But, like many rural, traditionally black Florida communities, Wabasso has deteriorated into an area stricken by poverty and rife with health problems. Residents say it's about time their pleas for help are heard.

"The black community here has always been pushed to the rear," said the Rev. Sylvester McIntosh, who's lived in Wabasso all his life and is vice president of the West Wabasso Progressive Civic Association. "I've got grandchildren who will live here, and we need to make it safe."

Through a variety of programs, both Brevard and Indian River Counties are trying to help communities like Wabasso pull themselves from destitution by finding the money to pay for programs to improve their living standards.

"We need lights, sidewalks. A lot of people's houses need fixing," said Annie Johnson, who has lived in Wabasso since 1950.

Help is finally here. The Indian River County Health Department got a \$30,000 federal environmental health assessment grant in January to help Wabasso residents to decide what they need and how to get it.

Julianne Renk, an environmental-health specialist, is working with community leaders and institutions, such as churches and the West Wabasso Progressive Civic League. So far, three town meetings have been held and the next is slated for June 14.

"It's not based on what we think the community needs. It's about empowering the community and involving them in solving issues," Renk said.

Nearly 500 people live in this rural, overlooked community a few miles from the oceanfront mansions of Orchid and Johns Islands.

Most are black, poor folks who live on Social Security or disability checks. One in four is over age 65. Young people move away because there are no jobs here.

More than half the residents have no access to county water or sewer service, and 70 percent of their septic systems have failed. Families share their neighbors' running water through garden hoses snaking under the sand roadways.

The water is so bad it turns sheets a rusty red-brown.

From 64th Avenue east, there are no paved roads. Flooding follows heavy storms, and there are no streetlights, except those installed by churches or at the county-owned Wabasso Park.

Even access to their post office is blocked by the golf course of an upscale development.

Too late?

Residents hope it won't be too late to restore their neighborhood. They say developers are usurping citrus groves and land from those who can't keep up with taxes to build \$200,000-plus home developments closed to residents.

Several groves now are housing developments. Some packinghouses have closed, unable to support the waning industry.

"Now, our young people must move to Palm Bay and other places to work," Johnson said.

Indian River County's Community Development Director Bob Keating said a project is proposed on the south side of County Road 510 west of 66th Avenue.

"There are other projects on the north side going farther west," he said. John's Island, nearby Orchid Island and the Lakes at Sandridge development west of King's Highway, residents say, have reduced or spoiled their water and taken away land.

Residents say those new developments increase traffic and lower the water table, increasing the concentrations of metals. Renk said the iron level in much of Wabasso is three times the normal level.

Jean Williams, 71, works at Hale Groves and brings water home. She and her husband, Curtis, had no running water until three years ago.

"Now, it's got rust in it," Curtis Williams said.

When she washes clothes, Jean Williams said, "I hang them up, and they turn brown."

Working together

On a door-to-door visit to assess health needs, Renk and Indian River Detective Teddy Floyd talk with an 80-year-old who lives in his car, a woman who at 71 works in a citrus packinghouse so she can bring home drinking water, and dozens of others living in unsanitary conditions.

"The Health Department is working with the county's Community Development Department and neighborhood leaders, churches and local agencies to research grants and other sources of funding," Renk said.

Residents have told them at town meetings that they need street lights, water they can drink, sewer systems that work, paved roads, transportation, drainage to prevent frequent flooding, and park improvements.

Sometimes, though, help can be misunderstood.

Residents who received notices of code violations -- for commercial vehicles and junked vehicles parked in residential areas, or for failing septic systems, among other things -- say they're being targeted.

"It's a notice. It's not a ticket. We want to work with you," Keating says.

Courtesy notices sent to homes with failing septic system also upset some residents. But its purpose was to inform residents that federal funds are available to help them, Renk said.

Similar programs have worked in neighboring Brevard County. Officials work directly with community leaders to identify and prioritize neighborhood issues. The County Commission uses 85 percent of its annual \$1.9 million Community Development Block Grant to rebuild neighborhoods in need, following strategy plans developed by residents.

Projects include a lift station in Cocoa so sewage doesn't back into homes in the Pine Grove Subdivision and a community center-hurricane shelter in the Sharpes area, and sidewalks and a sanitary sewer extension on Merritt Island, said Gay Williams, director of the Brevard County Housing and Human Services Department. Neighborhood strategy plans are being developed for other areas, too, Williams said.

"Residents must take an active role in improving their conditions," said Victor Hart, president of the Indian River County Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

He's worked with the Gifford community to make it a Front Porch Community, eligible for funding for projects such as home renovations and needed infrastructure. It's the only Front Porch community in Brevard or Indian River County.

In Wabasso, improvements are already evident.

The community now has a route on the Council for the Aging's free bus. County agencies plan water and street lighting districts.

Habitat for Humanity wants to build a community of homes there.

The county made \$365,000 in improvements to Wabasso Park, said County Administrator Joe Baird. New ball fields, lighting, restrooms and pavilions were installed, and two more pavilions planned.

Andrew Bowler, executive director of Indian River Habitat for Humanity, hopes to build a group of homes similar to Grace Pines in Gifford. "We build \$70,000 homes with mortgages of \$350 per month."

Fighting apathy

Wabasso residents theorize their community degenerated because of apathy.

"The downfall of Wabasso was caused by people who don't care and who don't come together to help each other," said Linda Johnson, who called Wabasso home for 41 years.

Ellis Poindexter knows his 30-year-old home needs improvements, but doesn't have the money.

"It's almost easier to tear it down and start over," he said. Many Wabasso homes are wood and have been attacked by termites.

Margaret Green Brown lives with three generations in a family home, one without intact screens to keep out insects. Nicknamed "Big Mama" because she cares for many children and teens while parents work, Brown worries about conditions for young people.

During the summer, many teens play basketball at her house, while young children play in dirt under a sprawling tree. "She's been a blessing to many in the community. If anyone needs anything, she'll give it," Floyd said.

Brown and other residents say conditions are depressing. But their faith is strong. The community boasts 10 churches, and most residents or their parents helped build those structures. Religious bumper stickers and signs on homes abound.

"God is Greater than any problem I have," says a sign on an abandoned home on 68th Avenue.

Others are bitter about long-time promises made by county officials. Johnny Cartwright, 43, watched his parents work for a better Wabasso, and promises for water and sewer service never materialized.

"It's easy for the county to promise you things, but they never give us anything. Wabasso is going to be like the dinosaur--extinct," Cartwright said.