

# 'Green Mile' program could make St. Lucie County a national model

By Eric Pfahler

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FORT PIERCE — Creating the nation's first "Green Mile" with the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratory could make St. Lucie County a national model for energy efficiency, an official with the lab said Wednesday.

That kind of national recognition could, in turn, lead to more companies bringing jobs to the county, area officials said.

The partnership announced Tuesday could put the county and its cities on par with Portland, Ore., as one of the top green areas in the nation, said Bob Schlicher, Oak Ridge's director of the Smart Energy Works Program.

"I think that the city and county would get recognition for being innovative," Schlicher said.

The partnership involves turning part of Fort Pierce into the nation's first municipal energy efficiency zone known as the "Green Mile" by checking a defined section of homes, businesses and public buildings to find ways to cut their energy costs.

The so-called "Green Mile" is not an actual square mile, but rather a collection of buildings — both public and private — in Fort Pierce that will be audited with the help of the Tennessee-based lab to enhance the area's energy efficiency.

Although plans will start with one yet-to-be-finalized space, area officials and Schlicher hope for expansion within and outside the county.

Schlicher said a firm timeline has yet to be decided, but the agreement could be finalized in late August or September with audits beginning in February. Oak Ridge, meanwhile, gets to implement its work in a community with the hopes of expanding the services throughout the country.

Area officials hope the plans will put the county at the front of the line when renewable energy companies decide to locate in the state and bring jobs. The partnership also could help the county get grant dollars.

The agreement includes the county, Fort Pierce, Port St. Lucie, Indian River State College and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Oak Ridge has a staff of 4,600, receives \$1.4 billion in annual funding and is the U.S. Department of Energy's largest energy lab.

Many details are still being worked out, but basically an individual homeowner would have his or her house audited to determine where energy costs could be cut. The county and cities, meanwhile, will work with Oak Ridge to create a vendor list of proven products that residents could buy. Oak Ridge is not a for-profit company and would serve as an "honest broker," Schlicher said.

"We give our unbiased technological assessment," he said.

Trust in such products is important for area officials.

St. Lucie County has created a loan program for energy-efficient products such as solar panels, but the program would not meet its purpose if people use the loans to buy products that do not work. The loan program has received a \$2.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy and other grant money could be coming.

Area officials are investigating whether other grants could be used to subsidize the energy-efficient purchases.

Schlicher credited area officials for approaching Oak Ridge earlier this year about the potential partnership. The lab is in the midst of creating an energy-efficient campus at the Tennessee lab, but has been looking for a city to implement its findings. When the area officials showed its progress in energy initiatives, the lab came to a quick agreement.

"It really comes down to the leadership of the county and the cities," Schlicher said.

