

Florida House Update: Revitalization Underway

by Michael J. Holsinger

The Florida House Learning Center, Sarasota's premiere demonstration education facility for resource-conserving sustainable living, is undergoing a transformation. Late last year, the entire model home was relocated to a new location on Beneva Road at the Sarasota County Technical Institute to make room for construction of a new technical high school. Before a planned reopening later this year, the learning center will be upgraded with new technology and a new landscape to demonstrate what can be done to retrofit and remodel existing homes to make them more efficient in use of energy, water, and other resources.

Since the Florida House first opened in 1994, significant strides have been made in implementing resource-conserving standards for new development. But existing homes have lagged far behind. The renewed Florida House will fill this void. Project leaders estimate that more than five million homes in Florida alone need energy and resource efficiency improvements, and if this were to take place, it would represent a potential \$250 billion economic opportunity for the green building renovation industry in the state.

Support of the community is needed to finish upgrading the Florida House so it can help stimulate such positive economic

activity. This includes partnerships and alliances with businesses and organizations, donations of funds, materials, and labor, as well as additional volunteers to help the effort.

The Florida House was established and operated as a joint educational venture. Key partners included Sarasota County Government, the non-profit Florida House Institute for Sustainable Development, University of Florida Extension, Sarasota County School District, and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. Now the intention is to broaden this base and transform the Learning Center through greater community collaboration and participation by the private sector.

If the past track record of the Florida House is any indication, this project is destined for success. Besides being the first residential demonstration education facility in the nation to portray "green" technology, it helped foster like projects in locations such as Salt Lake City, Utah; Charleston, SC; Baton Rouge, LA; and even Cairo, Egypt. It hosted 150,000 visitors in the past 13 years with a 98 percent satisfaction rate. Annual surveys showed that 63 percent implemented resource-conserving measures in their homes and landscapes.

A new 20-year lease has been negotiated with the School District for the new location,

and Sarasota County Government paid for the actual move of the house. The County and the Florida House Institute for Sustainable Development have retained Kathy Keh, Principal of Fortified Consulting, LLC, to conduct interviews in the community and prepare a feasibility study for a capital campaign to secure funds to construct a state-of-the-art design and display center adjacent to the Florida House, provide for periodic renovations and upgrades of the facility to stay up to date, and create an endowment for future operations. When this is completed, the Florida House will be in position to more fully engage the community in sustainability, create educational curricula for both youth and adults, and develop and deliver distance learning by satellite and internet regionally, nationally, and worldwide.

It is all a very ambitious new undertaking. But, with the support of the community, the new Florida House will become a reality. Those interested in helping are invited to call the Florida House at 941-316-1200.

Michael Holsinger is retired director of the Sarasota County Extension and chairman of the Florida House Advisory Committee. He was a leader in the creation of the original Florida House Learning Center.

