I recently had an opportunity to work with one of our University of Florida Public Relations students, Julissa Gonzalez. She was working on an article for her class, Writing for Mass Communication.

Ms. Gonzalez searched the internet for a topic relating to the environment and Osceola County, her home for the past nine years. She found reference to the Construction Education Center project I have been working on. I share her article with you. Best wishes to you all this holiday weekend.

Constructing an environmentally friendly home has an added benefit: it can help minimize hurricane damage.

Osceola County is working with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences to plan an Osceola County Construction Education Center that will encourage construction of homes that minimize wind damage while making better use of natural resources.

"It is a place where people could learn about windstorm damage, but we could also teach them about energy and water conservation," said Eleanor Foerste, natural resources agent, Osceola County Extension.

The Center, a project under UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension, had been discussed several years ago but was put on hold after Sept.11, 2001 and its impact on the economy.

"It’s time to talk about it again, now that we’ve had three hurricanes," Foerste said.

"Though similar centers, or "hurricane houses," built in other areas of Florida were motivated by Hurricane Andrew, the proposed Center in Osceola County was originally a response to the 1998 tornadoes that hit the area," Foerste said.

"The idea was we could build these houses, affiliate them with the University of Florida Extension, since we do off-campus education, and teach people how to build safer, stronger homes."

"Another issue that has become important in our area is our aging population," Foerste added.

"Homes are not designed for "aging-in-place" because they do not have doors wide enough or bathrooms big enough for wheelchairs," she said. The Center will have classes to explain how to build homes that deal with this emerging concern.

The original plans for the Center includes a classroom, offices, public restroom facilities and a kitchen as well as hands-on features.

"It’s not just a building, it actually has demonstrations," Foerste said. "So you can see how the wall is built, you can go up in the attic and see how the roof is tied in, you can see the air conditioning system, and you can understand why it’s important that certain components work."

When plans for the project first started, Osceola County School Board approved a proposed location next to the Technical Education Center Osceola. It would be beneficial to have it near TECO because that school already features a construction-trades program, Foerste said. "It just makes sense to have it over there where the students of construction could take advantage of it as well."

Classes at the Center could help construction workers by offering courses to help them renew their licenses.

Some classes are currently offered at the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office, 1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane, and are available to anyone who wants to take them.
"The Construction Education Center is a dream that can become a reality, but the information that people can learn from it is available now," Foerste said.

Developers at the conservation community of Harmony, Fla., took a University of Florida Extension class that led them to the ENERGY STAR ® program, a government-supported program to protect the environment through energy efficiency.

"We have seven residential builders, and each of them is required to construct 100 percent of their houses to ENERGY STAR ® standards," said Gregory Golgowski, conservation director at Harmony.

The class from University of Florida Extension influenced this action and caused Harmony to encourage residents to take classes there, he said.

"Every resident that moves to Harmony gets a package of basic materials, but they also get a coupon and information on Extension programs."

"During the recent hurricanes, the environmentally-friendly community, located about 30 miles from the coast, saw little structural damage to their houses, and their power stayed on," Golgowski said.

"The community’s practices help people save money on electric bills and create an appreciation for our natural system," he said.

"Unless you can place some value on something, you cannot protect it or appreciate it," he said. "By instilling that value, we think residents will better restore the environment."

One of the classes the Extension offers is a "Buy Green & Save" class, taught by Foerste, that deals with environmental topics, such as landscaping, lighting, termites, energy-efficient windows, water conservation, water heating, air conditioning and insulation.

"Those are all classes that we teach anyway, it’s just we were hoping that having a center, like they have in other counties, would create a bit more of a focus."

---

Eleanor Foerste  
Natural Resources Agent  
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida  
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane  
Kissimmee, FL 34744  
(321) 697-3000  
Fax (321) 697-3010  
efoe@osceola.org  
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu  
Date: November 28th, 2004