

sustaining excellence by **Bill Rosenberger** | Staff Writer

Schroeder-Manatee's Empire grass earns state recognition

The eighth Sustainable Florida Best Practices Awards was held in Tallahassee.

TALLAHASSEE — The eighth annual Sustainable Florida Best Practices Awards, held in Tallahassee Monday, earned three local organizations recognition for their environmentally friendly business practices.

SMR Farms, Sarasota Green Connection and the Sarasota County government were among a group of the most sustainable from around the state, but each were honored for different reasons. Tim Center, the director of the Council for Sustainable Florida, said each one of the 13 organizations brought something unique and Florida friendly to the table. For SMR Farms, it was a long-term investment in beauty and water conservation.

Takes green to make green

Mac Carraway, vice-president of SMR Farms didn't joined the Lakewood Ranch team until 2004, about five years after the turf farm discovered a grass that not only gleamed in the sunlight but also withstood the harshness of drought, needing little water to survive. The latter, Carraway said, is of utmost importance to the ever-growing Manatee and Sarasota counties.

The turfgrass is called Empire, developed by Sod Solutions in Mt. Pleasant, S.C. It is drought-tolerant as well as tolerant to lower quality irrigation water. Its characteristics, along with SMR Farms' water conservation practices, means there is more potable water for drinking.

"If you pull all of these benefits together, the water supply for the whole region is improved," Carraway said.

Not only that, Carraway said, but in the long run, it saves residents and the community money in lawn care maintenance and repair.

"Empire grass is more expensive up front, but over time, with reduced watering, less damage



SMR Farms Vice President **Mac Carraway**, center, accepted the 2006 Promising Practice Certificate in the WCI Green Building Award category in Tallahassee Monday.

and replacement, it's a good outcome," he said.

Carraway said St. Augustine grass succumbs to drought more easily than Empire, and it doesn't recover as well either. Empire grass also has defining characteristics.

"It's such a beautiful grass, but it's very different from St. Augustine," Carraway said. "(Empire grass) is dark green, has fine blades and appeals to residents who may have relocated from cooler weather climates."

It's that kind of innovative thinking that has made SMR Farms and Lakewood Ranch developer Schroeder-Manatee Ranch a prime example as a sustainable Florida company, Center said.

"(SMR Farms) is very well

aware of the tight water supply, and they went out and identified a new turfgrass and have used it throughout their operations," Center said.

The first Lakewood Ranch neighborhood to be developed using the Empire grass was Greenbrook in 2001. It also will be used in Country Club East and Lake Club.

Greener Sarasota

The Sarasota County government is doing its part in environmental management as well. When the county receives a building permit request that includes energy-efficient projects, it issues the permit as quickly as two days.

"They're not just speeding it up," Center said. "It's like lighting."

Center said Sarasota County is using the speedy approval process to encourage energy-efficient homes. The county also has been busy working with Florida Power & Light, developing a 250-kilowatt solar operation.

The Sarasota Green Connection, established in 2004, works to promote Sarasota businesses whose goals are environmentally sensitive. They publish the Sarasota Green Pages, a collection of more than 130 people- and planet-friendly businesses.

"It's these types of people, organizations and businesses that help defined excellence in environmental protection," Center said. "And we hope this encourages others to follow suit."

Contact **Bill Rosenberger** at brosenberger@ecobserver.com.

IN BRIEF

COMMUNITY NEWS AND NOTES

+ YMCA heading north of river

The Manatee County YMCA may be making a move to Parrish. The organization is seeking to lease or have property donated for a 6,000-square-foot to 12,000-square-foot Express YMCA building in Parrish, local YMCA President and CEO Sean Allison said.

The Express YMCA is smaller than a full YMCA facility and would include a fitness and exercise room, daycare center and offices for staff. It would not have a swimming pool or play fields, Allison said. A full YMCA, Allison said would cost upwards of \$6 million, although the Express facility could be operational at \$500,000.

+ Manatee residents may get tax relief

Manatee County residents may see their property taxes decrease some next year, county officials said last week.

Jim Seuffert, the county's finance director, said the reductions likely will occur, although it is still too early to tell how much relief an estimated 68,000 residents will receive. County Administrator **Ernie Padgett** is expected to make the recommendations.

+ Manatee home prices drop

Numbers released by the Manatee County Property Appraisers Office last week show the median price for a single-family home fell \$14,200 from April to May. This is the first drop in 28 months.

The median condo prices fell slightly.

+ Ellenton post office promotes child safety

The Ellenton Post Office and Manatee County Sheriff's Office partnered Saturday to raise awareness about the Amber Alert program and to promote child safety.

The U.S. Postal Service on May 25, Missing Children's Day, revealed its new Amber Alert stamp. The Amber Alert has helped locate more than 250 missing children.

COMMISSION by **Pam McTeer** | Staff Writer

Planners OK Forrest Creek East project

The Neal Communities development includes 105 single-family homes on 41 acres.

MANATEECOUNTY — More than 40 acres in Parrish have been tentatively approved for development.

The Manatee County Planning Commission last week recommended approval of Forrest Creek East, a single-family development along Red Rooster Road in Parrish.

The community, which is bordered to the south by the Kingsfield subdivision and to the west by the recently approved Forrest Creek community, will consist of 105 lots for single-family detached residences on about 41 acres at 4802 Red Rooster Road.

"This is definitely an infill development," county planner

Aristotle Shinas told commissioners.

The property is formerly agricultural and has been cleared of vegetation.

Developer John Neal of Neal Communities said the project falls under the North County Overlay District and will meet those requirements, which set increased buffering and design standards.

Neal Communities, he said, also plans to pave Red Rooster Road from U.S. 301 to the entrance of Forrest Creek East, which, he said, garnered support from neighbors. No residents spoke for or against the project.

Neal Communities Presi-

OTHER COMMISSION NEWS

- The commission approved an ordinance to prohibit engine compression release braking, or jake braking, along University parkway between Lorraine Road and Lakewood Ranch Boulevard.

- The board accepted and recorded a warranty deed from Ian Hutchinson and Irene V. Hutchinson required for the purchase of right-of-way for the Parrish corridor alignment south of Erie Road. The proposed alignment south of Erie Road will go through a 12-acre tract previously donated to the county by the Florida Department of Transportation for a north coun-

ty highway maintenance facility. In March, the board authorized staff to begin negotiating for the property south of the FDOT property, which is bordered on the south by 69th Street East. On May 9, the board executed a contract to buy the parcel for \$862,300.

- The commission continued public hearings to June 20 for the following land-use items: Rosedale Addition, Rosedale Highlands Phase III, Central Park along Lakewood Ranch Boulevard and LECOM Multifamily, an apartment project off Malachite Drive.

dent Dale Weidemiller said the project is not an addition to the

developing Forrest Creek subdivision as much as it is part of a

project the company has anticipated since the beginning.

The board unanimously recommended approval of the project, which will include 1.2 miles of nature trails that will connect recreational amenities between Forrest Creek and Forest Creek East.

The commission also recommended approval of preliminary site plans for Montecino Condominiums in Ellenton. The project proposes 47 multi-family residential units in four buildings and two docks along the Braden River. Adjacent property owners and developers praised the project, which they said provided easy access to stores for residents. The six-acre property sits at 6701 U.S. 301 North.

Only commissioner Marilyn Stastica opposed the project after the county attorney asked for a continuance on the vote.

Contact **Pam McTeer** at pmcteer@ecobserver.com.