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Activists team up to meet civic needs

**From broken fire hydrants to ailing health care,
FOCUS tries to get to the grass roots.**

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Cocoa King watched firefighters scramble over fences to find a working fire hydrant as a neighbor's house burned, killing the elderly woman inside.

After that tragedy last year, King vowed to not let that happen again.

King teamed with neighbors, politicians and city officials and now her Rio Grande Avenue neighborhood in Orlando has seven new functioning hydrants.

"This is what can happen when you speak up," King said.

But she is not finished, and she is not alone.

Working with a network of religious activists, King is pushing to get hydrants inspected, mapped and installed in neighborhoods around the county.

The Federation of Congregations United to Serve, or FOCUS, is pressing the public-safety issue in a "community-action meeting" with Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty at 7 p.m. Monday at First United Methodist Church in downtown Orlando. The meeting is open to the public.

"I've been meeting with FOCUS since I took office and I always enjoy our dialogue," Crotty said in a statement. "The group raises significant community issues that I look forward to addressing during our discussion."

FOCUS claims more than a dozen church congregations and 30,000 families within its ranks.

Since it started about 2000, the group has worked to deliver after-school programs to middle schools, lobbied for juvenile-justice programs and spearheaded a successful drive to get more Orange County parks.

Its agenda includes not only hydrants, but health care and housing.

This month, the group sent members to Washington to lobby for more money for children's health care.

Locally, it wants expanded hours for Orange County's Preventive Care Access Network, or PCAN clinics, which serve families without insurance. Longer hours would allow more working families to access the clinics.

The group also is trying to draw attention to the need for affordable housing, arguing that current Orange County proposals aren't enough to expand options for those with household incomes of roughly \$35,000 to \$70,000.

"New workforce housing policies should benefit all workers, not just certain 'essential workers,'" its news release says.

FOCUS members plan to press Crotty on all those issues, but they have already started getting results on hydrants.

Because of their work with former Commissioner Homer Hartage and county fire officials, a new ordinance is in the works that would require the roughly 2,600 privately maintained hydrants to be inspected annually.

"People think they're just like street lights," FOCUS member Beverly Tipton said. "They think if they are there, they work."

But King found out in her neighborhood that isn't always so.

King's neighbor, Margaret Rewis, died last year in her home as firefighters scrambled to find a water source. A privately maintained hydrant nearby didn't work.

So FOCUS wants to have all the public hydrants inspected and mapped -- which Orange County already is working on -- and require the same annual checkups for private hydrants. FOCUS member Richard Gluch said the group pinpoints issues that are pressing and affect a wide range of people. That helps its members bring energy to the work.

"It's a real team effort," Gluch said in explaining some of its successes. "And the more community involvement, the better."

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