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CITIZENS DISCUSS FUTURE OF SARASOTA

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A common theme on politicians' wish lists is more public involvement in charting a community's future. Through the efforts of one organization in Sarasota County, that plea is finding a lot of takers.

A not-for-profit, privately-funded group has spent more than six months talking with hundreds of residents about how they ideally envision the county's development. Wednesday, the organization behind those discussions, Sarasota County Openly Plans for Excellence presented 16 priorities gleaned by sifting through more than 2,000 participant suggestions.

SCOPE, based loosely on a similar grassroots venture in Jacksonville, got residents interested by turning to community leaders outside of government who produced snappy brochures and set up an Internet site at <http://www.scopexcel.org> that details the organization's goals and methodology. At every turn there is a form or meeting offering the chance to weigh in. Financial support is provided by the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, the William G. and Marie Selby Foundation and The Venice Foundation, and other private contributions are accepted. No taxpayer money is being used or solicited by SCOPE.

With word of the program spreading through its network of professionals, volunteers set to the streets in April to conduct more than 60 study group meetings in different neighborhood locations. The overall results of those talks were also presented in a 91-page report.

"These are the opinions of the study groups that went through this process," SCOPE spokesman Tim Dutton told reporters before an informational luncheon at Michael's On East that drew more than 400 people. "Participation was good from the outset, but it's even better now. This is a process we're starting that we expect to last for years."

Although the program is focused on Sarasota County issues, the group brought in Manatee County resident **Cynthia Newell**, president and founder of the private Neighborhood Leadership Initiative, to serve as the project director for SCOPE.

The success of the Sarasota County program in providing an opportunity for residents to talk about their community is a model that **Newell** said she hopes isn't ignored to the north where most of the discussions are taking place in commission chambers and court rooms.

"A citizen-led movement would definitely be helpful as Manatee County addresses its growth," **Newell** said. "It's just a wonderful opportunity for Manatee County to engage in a similar effort. I would love to see it happen in my own community."

The obvious first step is having someone step forward to take the reins of any grassroots effort.

"What happened here is a group of visionaries got together," **Newell** said. "Why don't we all get together and unite and get this vision in place so we can implement it (in Manatee County)?"

Dan Bailey, a Sarasota County attorney and chairman of SCOPE, said the group originally considered including Manatee and Charlotte counties in its program after recognizing that issues such as traffic, environmental resources and youth drug and alcohol abuse cross political boundaries.

"In an ideal world, we would have included Manatee County in the process," Bailey said. "The difficulty has been in learning to walk before we can run. It's just something we haven't been able to take on logistically."

Bailey said he instead favors "a regional consortium" of organizations working to press local and state politicians to tackle issues identified and prioritized by residents.

The next step for SCOPE is to pare down the 16 issues to just two over the next three months through a series of public hearings and meetings. Those two issues will then be given all of the organization's energy as volunteers study best practices nationwide to determine "specific recommendations and action plans for implementation."

The goal of SCOPE is to identify two or three new goals periodically as hurdles are crossed and the county evolves in the coming years, Bailey said. The next two community forums are scheduled for 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., Feb. 13, at the Venice Community Center and 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., Feb. 20, at The Boys and Girls Club, 3100 Fruitville Road, Sarasota.