

**Sarasota goal: Energy efficient community**

**MICHAEL BARBER**  
Herald Staff Writer

**SARASOTA** - Imagine not having a utility bill.

A partnership between Sarasota County government officials, home builders, Florida Power & Light Co., and others has people believing that possibility is attainable, and the U.S. Department of Energy appreciates those efforts.

During a noon ceremony Thursday, Terry Penney of the Department of Energy's **National Renewable Energy Laboratory** designated Sarasota County as the nation's first national renewable community.

The designation was made in recognition of Sarasota County's commitment to developing an energy efficient community that will be sustainable far into the future.

"This is a very important announcement," Penney said. "The president talked about our addiction to oil and we must find solutions immediately and cost effectively. We cannot wait 15 or 20 years."

County commissioners Paul Mercier, David Mills, Shannon Staub and Jon Thaxton were on hand to accept the designation, which was made at the Gulfcoast Florida Girl Scout Council Headquarters on Cattlemen Road.

"Sustainability is the linchpin of Sarasota County goals," Staub said. "Whether it's a service or activity in transportation, neighborhoods, economic development, growth management or environmental resources, nothing is done without thinking how that is going to impact the sustainability of our community."

An energy sustainable community would use technologies such as solar water heating, solar electricity and rooftop photovoltaic power-generating systems to supply most of the energy a home will need, drastically reducing monthly utility bills.

In addition, the use of plug-in hybrid electric vehicles will allow homeowners to save money on gasoline. The plug-in cars, which operate on a combination of gasoline and electrical batteries, can be charged by using a regular wall socket.

The ultimate goal is to build "zero-energy homes," according to Penney.

"The significance is that the house can be built to generate its own power," Penney said. "The energy that the house produces can supply all the energy for the house and the car."

Sarasota County is working with area home builders and FPL to move toward producing zero-energy housing.

"The first implementation of this will be to try to get five zero-energy homes built," Staub said. "Hopefully, it will take off from there."

Staub said she hopes the first zero-energy homes will be built in Sarasota County in a year to 18 months.

FPL is on board, according to spokesman Mel Klein.

"FPL is already a leader nationally in clean and renewable energy resources and energy conservation programs," Klein said. "Our FPL energy subsidiary leads the U.S. in wind generation."

Builder Lee Wetherington, owner of Lee Wetherington Homes, said he is planning to build two zero-energy homes in this area, including one in Lakewood Ranch. Zero-energy homes will be more expensive than regular homes, Wetherington said, but there will be dramatic savings in fuel and energy costs.

"A zero-energy home means that during the day it pushes energy back into the electrical grid, which runs your meter backwards," Wetherington said. "When you come home at night and crank your house up, then it uses that energy back up."

Two plug-in cars were on display Thursday as part of a two-day Sustainable Communities Workshop with Sarasota County government. The cars' manufacturers claim they can get up to 100 miles per gallon.

Sponsored by the the U.S. Department of Energy, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and other groups, the workshop features national and local experts talking about smart cars, smart houses, smart sites and other strategies for developing the communities of the future.

The conference wraps up with a full slate of speakers today.

Michael Barber, Herald reporter, can be reached at [mbarber@HeraldToday.com](mailto:mbarber@HeraldToday.com) and 748-0411, ext. 2640.