

April 24, 2008

Sarasota County asks community to 'Get on Board' May 22, 30 and 31

Sarasota County asks local citizens to participate in a series of interactive workshops on shaping public policy. Through inventive role-playing scenarios, residents will gain a better understanding of the challenges of balancing multiple governmental priorities, how to allocate resources for those priorities, and how to share ownership of the decision-making process. They will also have a chance to help Sarasota County better understand their own community priorities.

The workshops will take place:

- 6-9 p.m., May 22, Municipal Auditorium, 801 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota
- 2-5 p.m., May 30, Venice Community Center, 326 Nokomis Ave., Venice
- 9 a.m.-noon, May 31, Gulf Coast Event and Conference Center at Girl Scout Headquarters, 4780 Cattlemen Road, Sarasota

Each workshop will last approximately three hours and participants should plan to attend the entire session. Light refreshments will be served. Attendance is limited to 300 participants per session. According to County Administrator Jim Ley, the Sarasota sessions will be highly interactive events. "Participants will be involved in making real-life decisions based on very realistic simulations," he said.

Each simulation is built around a board setting that portrays a fictional community, where events occur that require teams to make decisions based on spending and priority. For example, participants might be asked to decide whether to harden an existing storm shelter or use the available funding to complete a much needed road project. If completing the road was chosen, a subsequent scenario might involve a strong hurricane that destroys the shelter.

Ley says that choices will be designed to force debate and consensus. Most important, there will never be a clearly perfect answer. No initiative will receive sufficient funds, creating the necessity for collaboration to reach a group consensus.

After making a series of operating decisions, groups will be presented with a major decision for the future. Then they'll be asked to rank their own community priorities.

"While we have positioned ourselves well due to solid planning, Sarasota County is facing serious financial challenges," said Ley. "A declining real estate market is impacting property values and a corresponding economic downturn has disrupted historic revenue streams like sales taxes, telecommunication taxes and gas taxes."

Ley hopes these workshops will actively engage county citizens in the governmental budget process, so they become personally invested and understand the county's responsibilities and limitations. To meet that goal, participants from all social and economic demographics are invited to attend at least one of the sessions.

For more information or to register, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask about "Get on Board."