



STAFF PHOTO: ROD MILLINGTON

Burt Polishook, front, Kafi Benz and others put together a Web site to encourage discussion in their neighborhood.

Sarasota group takes local politics to Web

The Internet site for the Indian Beach Sapphire Shores Association premiered this week.

By Yolanda Rodríguez
STAFF WRITER

After a neighborhood association meeting with developers last summer, Burt Polishook knew there was a problem.

Too much information and too little time to digest it.

So Polishook and Charlie Hegener hatched a plan for a Web site that would give neighborhood residents enough information before meetings to get a rich dialogue started on issues affecting them.

The Web site for the Indian Beach Sapphire Shores Association premiered this week (<http://www.sarasota-online.com/ibssa>). It is part small-town news and all high-tech, with links to dozens of cultural institutions around town, such as Selby Gardens and the Ringling Museum.

But the association wants the site to be more than just a passive bearer of information. They want e-mail, they want to talk about issues, and they want to get ahead of the curve when it comes to plans affecting the neighborhood.

"You have meetings and most people don't go," said Hegener.

"The hope of something like this is that you might get a higher level of participation. Dialogue

over the Net and then have it occur in the meetings as well."

The neighborhood, usually called "the museum area," is west of North Tamiami Trail and south of USF/New College. It has about 1,200 homes and 600 of them are in the association, said Polishook, who designed the site.

Comcast Online Communications posted the site for free, as it does for other non-profits.

Polishook said he will update the information as often as necessary. He said that the site is probably the most extensive one created by a neighborhood association in Florida.

Researching on the World Wide Web for other neighborhood sites, Polishook found some one-page wonders in other states, but nothing like what the association has put together.

The hope is that by posting information about development plans and other topics, more people will be informed and be inclined to participate in their local government, said Kafi Benz, the editor of the site and a director of the neighborhood association.

Benz said that while participation in local government is pretty good, it can always be better. And getting involved requires a big learning curve because there is often so much information to go through. She hopes the site will help make things understandable for people.

"We are going to try to make it as close a community as possible," Benz said.