

## Officials face public

*Panel shares updates, answers at town hall meeting*

**By JASON WITZ STAFF WRITER**

PORT CHARLOTTE — If Howard Shaw had his way, there would be no significant budget cuts at the Charlotte County Sheriff's Office.

The agency, he explained, is going to need every penny when the "derelicts from New York" infiltrate the area. Another man stood before the panel of elected officials and questioned the need to send so many emergency units to the home of a deceased person.

Personal remarks like these dominated the conversation Thursday evening at a town hall meeting intended to give residents the opportunity to speak with local leaders.

The Charlotte County Curmudgeon Club invited officials of every conceivable governing body to the question-and-answer session at the Cultural Center of Charlotte County. The club had a similar event last year.

"This is a place where the public can come and give comments directly to the officials," said club president Dale Watson.

Although those topics varied, it became clear anything was fair game.

Several residents urged the county commissioners present, in so many words, to lay off law enforcement when it comes to the budget.

Recently, commissioners rejected the Sheriff's proposed budget, saying further reductions were needed.

Those present Thursday said they won't risk public safety, with one resident even suggesting the commissioners work for less. The comment drew applause.

Sheriff Bill Cameron did not respond to a question early on about whether he would give in to the county's demands that he cut 15 percent.

Murdock Village was another point of contention.

Ray Sandrock, the county's budget director, updated the crowd as to the mounting debt of the failed project.

Currently, the county has \$63 million in outstanding debt, although there are plans in place to eliminate the amount within 20 years.

Others wanted to know what was being done at the local level in regard to the swine flu outbreak.

While no mass vaccine is available for the H1N1 strain, a Charlotte County Health Department official said the situation is being monitored closely. As of Thursday, there were 21 confirmed cases locally.

"Right now, there's no reason for alarm," said Herman Velasco, environmental health administrator.

For some, the meeting was a way to get a better feel about how officials are spending tax dollars.

"I like to know what they're doing with our money," said Port Charlotte resident Dorothy Murphy.

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Residents had the opportunity to question their elected officials Thursday evening during a town hall meeting at the Cultural Center of Charlotte County. The Curmudgeon Club played host to the event so the community could get direct feedback about any concerns.