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Groups Unite Against Trade Pact
By Susan Salisbury, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Deborah Smith remembers seeing the crazed-looking protesters at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle on television.

"They looked like a bunch of young punk rockers," said Smith, a Jupiter Farms resident. "I didn't understand what it was about."

Now, the 45-year-old former high school history teacher and secretary is becoming one of them. Not a punk rocker but a free-trade protester of the nonviolent sort.

She's heading Stop FTAA Palm Beach County/Treasure Coast, a recently formed coalition of six groups such as the Sierra Club and the Green Party who oppose the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas. The pact would turn 34 nations in the Americas and the Caribbean into a giant free-trade zone.

The Free Trade Area of the Americas ministerial meeting in Miami Nov. 20-21 is expected to attract anywhere from 20,000 to 100,000 protesters, according to estimates from the U.S. Trade Representative's Office and the summit's Miami organizers.

Smith and her group are making plans to go to Miami on buses with a projected 10,000 people from Palm Beach County and the Treasure Coast's AFL-CIO and other organizations.

"This is becoming very mainstream," Smith said. "The people protesting this don't normally protest. These are middle-aged working families concerned about jobs and public services, water, education and critical services they do not want to see privatized."

Stop FTAA is working on costumes, posters and giant puppet heads of President Bush, other world leaders and corporate chiefs to take to the Miami protest.

Formed in May with 30 core members, Stop FTAA is having its kickoff event on Labor Day at Carlin Park in Jupiter.

Wil Van Natta, a longtime political activist and 48-year-old lifeguard on Palm Beach County's beaches, plans to swim 12 miles from the Lake Worth Inlet to the beach at Carlin to draw attention to the cause.

"It is America at stake right now," said Van Natta, a union member who, if his mini-marathon is successful will be greeted by attendees of an AFL-CIO picnic.

Two large Florida industries, citrus and sugar, have launched campaigns against provisions of the trade pact. Citrus growers say that if they lose current tariffs on foreign orange juice, particularly from Brazil, they won't be able to compete. Sugar interests say their industry could be ruined by any increase in foreign sugar imports.

Protests of trade pacts and globalization are nothing new, said Antonio Villamil, vice chairman of Florida FTAA Inc., which is organizing the November meeting and wants Miami to become the permanent secretariat of the Free Trade Area of the Americas after its expected signing in 2005.

"Everybody needs to be heard in terms of their perspectives," Villamil said.

The University of Miami's North-South Center is coordinating workshops Nov. 17-19, at which people who have concerns about the trade pact will be able to express their opinions "under the rule of law," Villamil said.

For Stop FTAA members, those opinions are sharper than they used to be. Pat Scanlon, 51, of Lake Park is a retired schoolteacher who learned about the trade pact when she attended a Leesburg retreat run by Pax Christi, a Catholic peace and social justice group.

"I did not know what went on with NAFTA and the FTAA," Scanlon said. "Now it is horrifying me, and it is scaring me to death.... The whole purpose of FTAA is that corporations make a profit at the expense of the people."

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