



## 2010 communities of excellence winners safety and security



# Avalon Park in Orlando and Forest Ridge Village in Fernandina Beach

by Kathy Danforth

## **L**arge Community Avalon Park Property Owners Association in Orlando, Florida *Watchful, Aware, and Secure*

After being named a finalist in the Safety and Security category of the Communities of Excellence contest last year, Avalon Park has proudly advanced to the winning position in this year's competition. They are clearly a larger community, with over 3500 homes and 12,000 residents, but have cultivated a spirit of involvement and service that has resulted

in a close-knit devotion to the community's security and protection.

The Avalon Park Property Owners Association includes 1136 townhomes and over 2400 single-family homes spread over 1860 acres, with 400 of those acres encircling the community as a nature preserve. A separately-operated commercial area is located at the heart of the community, providing both businesses and apartment dwellings. With an average age of 35-40, and approximately 95 percent of the residents staying at Avalon Park year-round, a large, active group is engaged in pursuing the community's motto of "Live, Learn, Work, Play!"

Two elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school are located on the property, as well as a host of amenities: ten swimming pools, a splash park, tennis courts, volleyball courts, three parks with playground equipment, open green spaces, a community center with fitness equipment for the South Village, 55 ponds suitable for fishing, and a multitude of trails for biking and



walking. The Avalon Park Group hosts several large events attended by the East Orlando area population, including fall's Oktoberfest, winter's Avalon Aglow, and a summer Fourth of July celebration. Though there are only a couple of routes in and out of the community, close observation and awareness are the keys to security in the community since controlling access tightly is not feasible.

Community volunteers are behind the programs and events that keep the association safe and informed. Approximately 40 percent of the owners are involved with the Neighborhood Watch program. Tracy Durham, manager of Avalon Park and former property management portfolio manager, states, "Our Neighborhood Watch is the strongest I've seen in all the communities I've ever worked in. Some people think you have to sit out on the porch with your flashlight, and that's just not the case. It's being aware of what's going on and watching out for your neighbors. We instruct everyone to call 911 first if they see



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## Cypress Isles, Orlando, Florida

By making an effort to know adjacent neighbors and to keep each other informed, residents are keyed in on security concerns and feel safe reporting anything abnormal. Multiple residents have participated in the Orange County Sheriff's Departments Citizens on Patrol (COP) program. Through this volunteer program community residents receive 30 hours of training and become qualified to patrol the communities and area shopping centers, creating additional layers of security and reporting suspicious activity and persons to the sheriff's department.



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## Deer Lake Run HOA, Apopka, Florida

In an effort to strengthen security, the HOA moved into swift action and established a Neighborhood Watch program. The HOA has also developed a system for sending out e-mail alerts to residents when incidents occur or when someone wants to notify their neighbors about suspicious activity. The e-mail alert system and website has also become a great vehicle for sending out crime prevention tips and for owners to increase their individual levels of home security in addition to the overall security within the HOA.

suspicious activity, and then we encourage them to submit an online incident report explaining what was observed." Incident reports are monitored by a resident volunteer webmaster, who e-mails the information to people in the Neighborhood Watch in the area involved.

Tracy recalls, "We had a hit-and-run incident where a vehicle was hit and the driver sped away. Because someone went online and posted an instant report, they were able to catch the driver within an hour." The website is also used for reporting lost pets or other lost items.

"Neighborhood Watch is an amazing group of people," Tracy says. "It takes one person to start it, but the rewards are huge." In

the case of Avalon Park, Tracy explains, "Brenda Kolbrich took on the daunting task. She went from door to door, village by village, and worked with local law enforcement." Tracy notes, "If you feed people, they will come. Have potluck dinners and meetings to express the needs and



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concerns the residents have, and go from there.”

Avalon Park has participated in America’s Night Out Against Crime, a nationwide night-out program sponsored by Target. “The purpose is to show criminals that the communities are not going to stand for crime,” according to Tracy. They also opened a safety and security center on the property. “We’ve had a group of residents volunteer to man the station 15–20 hours/week and hand out safety education materials, answer questions, and help direct people.” Another event that the association holds is the Safety Olympics, with information on fire safety, fitness and body safety, and other key safety factors.

Citizens on Patrol (COPs) is a volunteer-driven program expanding the show of security force in the neighborhoods. “The uniformed volunteers drive in vehicles from the Orange County Sheriff’s office and have access to police scanners and walkie-talkies, so if they see suspicious activity, they can contact the Orange County police directly,” Tracy states. Off-duty police are hired for 30–40 hours of patrol each week, with more for special events. If there is a particular concern, the Orange County Sheriff’s office provides extra on-duty patrols.

The community also is mindful of security in their design. “We keep shrubs cut and maintained near the amenities so you can see the area clearly and there’s not a lot of hiding places,” Tracy notes. “There’s only a couple

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## Vanderbilt Community Association, Naples, Florida

The association's board asked members to vote on a proposal to utilize certain designated funds and assessments for erecting a chain link fence across the perimeter of the community. During the summer of 2009, the fence was completely erected and new landscaping was added along the perimeter. In recognition of the importance of mitigating the potential of wild fires, the community contacted representatives of the Golden Gate Fire Protection District. A major component of the Firewise Plan called for the trimming of Palmetto Palm Groves in the community's upland preserve areas.

of ways in and out of the community so you can't commit a crime, jump a fence, and run," she points out.

Awareness and education are ongoing processes. Tracy explains, "There were quite a few car break-ins at the end of last year. We educate homeowners because we all have to take a little responsibility—don't leave your GPS on the dash, lock up valuables, and don't leave your purse in an unlocked car." Every newsletter has a safety topic,

with this month's including a reminder that people are always watching, so don't conspicuously stash your valuables under your car seat before you leave the car, as they will discern what your actions mean.

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Tracy comments, "Because the community is safe, homeowners may feel like they don't have to take precautions, but nobody is free from crime. We could build a wall all around, with electric wire, but crime can come from within. You're never 100 percent safe."

The economy has produced a higher number of vacant homes, but Tracy reports, "We haven't seen higher levels of vandalism, and I attribute that to the eyes in the community and all the efforts of those involved. The key to keeping the community safe is keeping a close watch on those homes that have gone into foreclosure and have been abandoned. That has been very important in our safety efforts." Tracy credits the board with wisely steering the community through a balance of cutting costs while maintaining safety. "You could do away with a maintenance line item, but once your streets are littered and it looks like you don't care and people aren't watching, it's an open door for inviting crime in. We aren't going to stand for any craziness!" she exclaims.

One struggle with making people aware of crime, to prevent and solve incidents, is that they are indeed more aware, and as a result, some may feel less safe. "Everybody needs to understand that even though we have crime, we have low levels and minor types for the most part," Tracy comments. "Sometimes pinpointing where the crimes are and having the information readily available scares people." However, their crime rates are lower than those of other nearby areas.

Tracy feels that the high levels of concern and involvement at Avalon Park come from the small town feel and the original developer's vision. "There's a huge sense of ownership, and people are proud to live here," Tracy observes. "You get that everybody-knows-your-name feeling. When you hear developer Beat Kahli tell the story about coming over from Switzerland and seeing the land and having a vision for what the community could be, you really buy into that whole thought and vision. Once you buy into that vision and you're in the community and part of it, it's hard not to be involved," Tracy explains. "You want to be involved and give back and you're inspired by that." People watching out for each other is a part of community life that is well worth the effort.



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**Small Community**  
**Forest Ridge Village in Fernandina Beach**  
***It Takes a Village to Combat Crime***

Forest Ridge Village is one of the 2010 Communities of Excellence winners in the Safety and Security category due to their aggressive and successful efforts to eradicate crime in their community.

The community is located less than two blocks off the ocean in Fernandina Beach. The two-story, townhome-style buildings were constructed on a sand dune, so they are elevated above the surrounding beach area. The association has 104 units, and Associa manager Sherrill Schafer explains, "It was originally plotted to have 138 units, but the final phase was never built so they have a large park area."

Since the community was built in 1982, the effects of time reached the point where they had to be reckoned with, and a major renovation was undertaken in 2007. The \$2.5 million project required a special assessment of approximately \$25,000 per unit. Large expenditures get everyone's attention, and Sherrill reports, "They held numerous information meetings and went through a board recall. There was a combination of folks who felt the restoration was too expensive, and others who thought it didn't go far enough. The new board got bids together, hired a construction inspector who helped them review proposals to make sure they were getting what they were paying for, and hired a different contractor. They also hired an attorney and passed the special assessment with the option to pay up front to avoid interest." All in

all, Sherrill states, "They made hard decisions, followed Florida statutes and governing documents, and got it done!"

The renovation was all-encompassing, from roofs to irrigation. Sherrill relates, "The paint shade was changed, new roofs were put on, and T-111 siding was replaced with hardy-plank lap siding. They replaced most of the exterior stairs and boardwalks." Additionally, about half of the owners decided to replace their windows and patio doors to meet new standards for hurricane-resistance.

To gain a firmer footing and better organization of records, the community switched from self-management to a professional manager. A part-time, on-site administrator handles the day-to-day business of office work, questions from guests, policing for violations, and handing out pool keys. The grounds maintenance and general outside maintenance are handled by a native of Fernandina Beach, of whom Sherrill notes, "He remembers when the property was a sand dune covered by an oak canopy. He is the eyes and ears of the community and has a great deal of pride in his work and in the appearance and well-being of Forest Ridge Village."

The vigilance of on-site employees and residents has been a great asset to the community in addressing problems that became evident after the renovation. "We were seeing signs of drug trafficking—lots of cars coming into the community, going into a couple of units, staying five minutes, and leaving. There were seedy-looking characters and a couple of known criminals

as tenants," Sherrill recalls. "There were car break-ins and vandalism, and in one incident a resident found someone on their balcony."

The situation called for action, and Forest Ridge Village obliged. The board president and manager went to the police department and had a face-to-face meeting with the police chief. "As it turned out, they knew about these people and had been watching them," Sherrill reports. "The police became our partners and assigned us an officer to call every single time we saw suspicious activity. The maintenance man, on-site administrator, and volunteers kept watching [and reporting] until these known drug addicts could be arrested."

The police made a number of suggestions, and the community heightened security through a variety of means. Observation is a key component to safety and Sherrill says, "We owe a tribute to Vicki Holcomb, our on-site administrator, because she makes it her business to

know the comings and goings of the people. She knows when there are vacation rentals, and if she sees activity when no one should be there, she communicates that." The residents are not involved in an official Neighborhood Watch program, but there is a self-appointed group that is attentive and reports any suspicious activity. "If any criminal activity is brought to our attention, we send communication to all the owners and residents letting them know to be mindful and watchful of whatever the crime may be," Sherrill notes. They use e-mail and notices delivered to each unit's door to ensure that residents and owners are informed. Also, the community website provides a direct link to the police department as well as other security information.

To keep known problems from entering the Village, the association passed a resolution requiring criminal background checks on long-term rentals of six months or more. Another deterrent to crime has been increased lighting. "There were some fixtures that needed to be replaced, and our maintenance person now does a light check at least every other week," Sherrill states. "Any time a homeowner calls and tells us that they don't feel they have enough lighting around their area, we add the lighting."

They have gained more control over card key access to the property's facilities by assigning numbers to individuals. With this information, if someone is no longer authorized for access, they can be removed from the system. Parking spaces have been renumbered so they are not easily linked to a unit. Sherrill recalls, "Years ago when I was in the apartment business, we were always very careful not to identify an assigned parking space with a unit. To me, every community should practice that just as a matter of safety."

Vehicles are a part of everyone's operations, including criminals, and Forest Ridge Village included them in their security crackdown. "It's an association rule that vehicles have to be street-operational and for that it takes a current license plate," Sherrill explains. "If a car has an expired license plate, it's tagged, and eventually it's towed if its license is not renewed. We wanted to weed out any vehicles that were stolen or brought on the property and stored there or abandoned."



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## **Grand Haven Master Association, Palm Coast, Florida**

The Grand Haven community is officially a Fire-wise Community. The project began with members of the Grand Haven CDD, the GHMA, and the Grand Haven CERT on tours of the area to determine possible wildfire risks. The grant covers the cost of mowing and mulching undeveloped areas that are within 30 feet of homes. The purpose is to remove palmettos, wax myrtles, and shrubbery that provide fuel for wildfires. The program does not include controlled burning activities. It also excludes wetland preserves controlled by the St. John's Water Management District.

Sherrill comments, "At the beginning we felt like unlicensed cars could be related to crime, but now we're convinced that it's just people not licensing their vehicles for one reason or another. But Forest Ridge Village is very secluded and would make a great hideout for a criminal or stolen vehicle." Thus they plan to continue to keep their eyes on everyone and everything.

The community's efforts have had the desired effect. From a situation where drug deals were suspected on a daily basis, "Crime has dropped to virtually nothing," according to Sherrill. "There have been no criminal incidents this year!"

The improved atmosphere brings more community camaraderie. "The general sense of community pride is up," Sherrill observes.

Owners also participate in the annual picnic and annual clean-up day. For spring clean-up, the community brings a dumpster in to dispose of things that have accumulated over the year as well as trimmings and outside debris.

After renovating the property and tackling crime, the community was hit, along with most associations, by the economic downturn. Sherrill recalls, "They got through the renovation and then they became very cautious with their money. They watched pennies and put off non-essential projects." They are funding reserves, but anything cosmetic or non-essential has been postponed or spread out over time.

One key to their navigation of the financial narrows has been the diligent pursuit of fees owed. "Except in the cases of inevitable foreclosure, we don't let delinquencies fall so far behind that the owners have no hope of catching up," Sherrill notes. "If an account falls too far behind, there's the threat the owners will just walk away. We work with them if they are struggling and give them an opportunity to work out a payment plan. A little money's better than no money—make that part of the collection policy. The purpose of a collection action should be to collect the debt, not to grow the legal fees." At this point fewer units are going into foreclosure and some that had entered foreclosure now have the banks paying fees, so the community's financial picture is improving.



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To save money, Sherrill explains that each individual item is examined for possible savings. For example, worn straps on pool furniture have been replaced rather than replacing the furniture itself.

One means of saving was found by separating out wastewater fees to be billed to each individual unit. "Since the inception of the community, the wastewater fees had been billed in one lump sum regardless of whether a unit was vacant," Sherrill recounts. "By contacting the city I found out that the wastewater charge could be transferred to each individual water bill. That way if the unit is vacant and the water is shut off, no one pays that wastewater fee. With an average of ten vacant units, the association could save \$260 per month!"

Though the problematic economy is not completely behind them, overall Sherrill says, "The majority of homeowners feel very good about the changes that have taken place at Forest Ridge Village. People who haven't been to the community for a while come straight to Vicki and say, "We can't believe how good Forest Ridge Village looks!" Sherrill sees great encouragement for herself and others in the improvement in appearance and atmosphere that the community has achieved. "It gives hope to those communities who feel like they've lost control and there's no hope for a turn-around. There's always hope! Forest Ridge Village is a study on how a true community can work." ■



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