



community of excellence  
winner—safety and security



# Hunter's Creek

## Safety in Numbers

by Kathy Danforth

**W**ith 25,000 residents and seven square miles of property, Hunter's Creek operates on a grand scale. This especially applies to their safety and security measures, which earned them the distinction of winner in the Communities of Excellence Safety and Security Initiatives Division for larger—or much larger—communities.

The development was started in 1986 and now consists of 4,800 single-family homes, 3,200 multi-family homes, and 800 condominiums grouped

into 38 neighborhoods with community leadership. David Shirk, president of the Hunter's Creek board, explains, "The neighborhoods make decisions regarding paint schemes, plants, and that kind of thing within the neighborhoods. They each have their own Architectural Review Committee that reports to the master association and they each contribute to the Council of Directors, a committee of all neighborhood leaders that get together every other month to discuss issues."

Though David is himself retired, he states, "We're definitely not a retirement community—we're very family-oriented. Everybody outside of Florida presumes that if you're in Florida you must be retired," which is not the case at Hunter's Creek. "The average age is probably the low 40s," says David. There are three public elementary schools and a middle school that feeds into the high school. "We have five large parks and three or four pocket parks for little kids," David says. The larger parks include courts for basketball, beach volleyball, shuffleboard, and tennis; fields for baseball and soccer; walking paths; and playgrounds. "All clubs are run by volunteers," David notes, with the soccer club boasting 800 kids. Over 100 lakes are scattered through the property and bass up to 13 pounds have been caught—not just child's play.

David feels that one of the strengths of Hunter's Creek is, "We're very well-organized." This is achieved through the 47 employees, headed up by the management of John and Nancy Raznick, and 14 committees under the board. Landscape and maintenance is the largest department, with 15 employees, though they also contract out much of the mowing and chemical application.



The three-member communications section puts out a 48-page monthly publication. David reports, "It has human interest stories, community standards information, what's happening in the neighborhood and central Florida, safety tips, and input from each manager." Neighborhood managers each handle day-to-day operations for about 18 neighborhoods. There is also a financial department, community standards department, and recreation and special events department to provide staff direction for these areas.

With volunteers and the recreation department, "We've got something major going on every month and that's one of the things that makes us a neighborhood community," says David. There are major attractions for every season, whether it's Bunny in the Park in the spring, Turkey Trot

or Hunter's Creep Night in the fall, the Christmas concert in the park in the winter, or Fourth of July festivities in the summer. Volunteers have created groups such as the Fabulous Fifties Plus, an organization with over 100 mature members that meet for social and service events. The Hunter's Creek Women's Association gathers for activities and fund-raisers from garage sales to Bunco groups to cooking, scrapbooking, and wine-tasting.

Hunter's Creek committees attend to the details of strategic planning, covenant enforcement, tennis, appreciation, architectural review, dog parks, landscaping, magazine, management, nominations, property review, public safety, and rules. The finance committee is currently where attention is drawn with the current real estate downturn. "Some houses doubled in value in 2005, but we're all paying for it now," David observes. "The houses were just going up so fast and everyone was so proud of the value of their house, and now it's dropped way back." Since house values have lost as much as 30 percent of their value since that peak, "It's terribly difficult if you bought in that period," David commiserates.

Since condominiums are more typically bought as an investment, Hunter's Creek has seen a number of those units encounter difficulties. This caused a special assessment, spread over the entire community, but David observes, "We're going to be



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better off than we thought at the beginning of the year." One bonus is their capital improvement fee, which is charged with every change of deed—when the bank repossesses a property and then sells, that income is generated twice.

Though Hunter's Creek may defer capital projects until the economy improves, David explains, "Part of our strategic plan is to keep Hunter's Creek looking picture-perfect all the time, so the property values are much higher than others in the area. We maintain the value of the houses by keeping our master property looking good. It's a strategy for long-term success. In keeping with this approach,

some non-essentials such as decorative fountains and lights are kept even in a tight budget to preserve the community's aesthetic appeal. To avoid the broken-window syndrome of trouble being attracted to houses that appear unkempt, the association tends to any houses which are not being maintained and assesses the cost to the property.

**Security: "Some Call It Nosy; We Call It Safety"**

Hunter's Creek has placed a high priority on safety and security since the community began, with both paid employees and resident volunteers contributing to their low crime rate. They have hired off-duty deputies to patrol the property since its initial construction. David explains, "Initially, they were here to protect the assets of the community. Over the years, they've become more neighborhood-oriented." Currently they have 18–20 part-time employees putting in 12,000 hours/year under the direction of Hunter's Creek part-time sergeant.

The community is happy with their secure environment, but at a cost of half a million dollars each year, David concedes, "It is a challenging subject. Is the low crime rate because we have the deputies, or for some other reason? But, we don't want to stop the off-duty patrols and have our crime rate go through the roof. Many of our residents don't understand why we have to pay anything." David points out, "The deputies go to where the crime is; it's a catch-22. But, the county has increased their patrol the past year or two because we complained about having to use so much off-duty patrol."

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Residents are involved in “neighbors watching neighbors” through their Neighborhood Watch and Community Alert Network. Thirty of the thirty-eight neighborhoods have a Neighborhood Watch program, to follow the sheriff’s office’s advice: “The best crime prevention device ever invented is a good neighbor.” David explains, “Each neighborhood has block captains and neighborhood captains. We put a pyramid over the top with one resident who works with five area captains that work with eight to ten neighborhoods each.” The Community Alert Network is an associated phone/email tree to communicate security or other alerts, but a resident must participate in the Neighborhood Watch program to receive them.

The Citizens on Patrol (COPs) program moves the residents up to a higher level of involvement. While the Neighborhood Watch relies

on residents noticing any unusual activities as they carry out their usual activities, the COPs program uses volunteers to patrol in Orange County Sheriff’s cars. “This was started seven years ago and has been very successful. They basically drive around as additional eyes and ears for the Sheriff’s Department,” David reports. There are approximately 20 licensed and certified volunteers, who watch for suspicious activities, notify owners of unsafe practices such as leaving garage doors open, check for unauthorized guests, and address traffic issues. There are 70 miles of roads in the community, and COPs volunteers may assist with uncooperative vehicles, directing traffic, or issuing parking citations.

The community has held public safety fairs, complete with helicopters and ladder trucks, and presentations to continue informing the residents and promoting attention to safety and security. Experts have addressed issues such as gangs, alcohol abuse, lighting, locks, glass panels by doorways which can be broken to gain access, and pool safety. Some volunteers have also trained for the Citizens Emergency Response Team (CERT) to respond to disasters.

**Is the Grass Greener?**

With a community this size, one might think they could be a town of their own. This idea did arise several years ago, and David says, “If we were to become a municipality,

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we would be the fifth largest in Orange County. We wanted to find out if there were benefits, so we had a study commissioned. We get waste, recycling, streets, lighting, fire, and police services from the city. We'd have to do all that. The capitalization costs to become a city would be outrageous. We're happy with the situation the way we are—you would just do it if you're not happy, because it's a huge undertaking." In comparing the Hunter's Creek budget to two similarly-sized communities that became cities, David notes that they have budgets of 55 million and 38 million annually, compared to Hunter's Creek's 7 million dollar budget—quite a bit of involvement to undertake without a compelling benefit. David also found, "Many communities that have become cities have tried to go backwards because they've discovered how daunting the task is."

Hunter's Creek decided to pass on the option to become a city in part because "we have an excellent relationship with the county," states David. "Every year we have a meeting with the Hunter's Creek managers and the county managers. The mayor, the commissioners, the administrators, and the deputy administrators come. It's huge—we're the only community in central Florida that does this."

"We sit down and talk about problems, from streets and drainage to getting lights repaired to having traffic lights installed. We get to know who to talk to on a daily basis instead of having pent-up demands one time per year. It has helped us tremendously over the years."

One act of progress that Hunter's Creek has actively fought is construction of a high-speed rail project from the Orlando Airport to Tampa via the center of the Hunter's Creek community. David says, "We sent over 800 emails to the high-speed rail authority board until they said, 'Turn it off—we can't take it.' There were over 350 residents at one meeting. That was probably my proudest accomplishment—getting that many people organized." Though the project was set aside, David observes that the project is on the table again because of stimulus money.

One change that Hunter's Creek does hope to gradually phase in is "going green." "We're looking very hard at what we can do to be as 'green' as possible," David relates, "but every effort costs something." A computer-monitored sprinkler system has been installed to curtail unnecessary water use through the hundreds of thousands of sprinkler heads throughout the community. "Water usage has been cut by 50 percent. Even Disney is talking to us about putting one in," David says.

"We hope to do more capital projects, increase our green efforts, and do more for our neighbors," David comments. But otherwise, things are looking good and David declares, "We hope nothing changes." At Hunter's Creek, the grass is greener inside the fence. ■

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