



community of excellence  
winner—environmental



## Pelican Cove

### A Junction of Creativity and Service

by Kathy Danforth

**B**ehind a stretch of lush foliage along Highway 41 in Sarasota lies Pelican Cove Condominium Association. This 731-unit association is one of the largest under one board of directors in Florida, and maintains a low-profile, environmentally-friendly retreat between the bustle of the shopping areas on one side and the Little Sarasota Bay on the other.

Susan Jewett, a resident of Pelican Cove, who first saw the Communities of Excellence contest advertisement states, "I thought, 'Oh, what a

neat idea,' and I thought we would do well in the environmental category. Then I thought we should submit for all five groups," a very appropriate move. She and fellow resident Ann Spencer collected, edited, and submitted information with help from other residents and committees. Pelican Cove was proud to be named as winner in the environmental division as well as a finalist in every other category.

The 75-acre botanical setting attracts residents with an environmental bent; Susan says, "To live in Pelican Cove, you really have to appreciate and love nature." Though there are 82 buildings, they are a maximum of two-stories high and the wooded exteriors blend into the plantings. Within the property, there are different neighborhoods capturing various views and atmospheres—the bay houses with direct views of the bay, brook houses with a creek-side setting, glen houses with azalea gardens, tree houses in a more wooded area, and harbor houses facing the 87-slip marina.

"There are miles of walkways along the bay and trails through the woods," Susan notes, "and in the off-season, I can go for a walk and not see another person." A 150-foot pathway and surrounding land has been developed into a butterfly garden by replacing a growth of invasive pepper trees with native plantings and flowers. "Butterflies just love it," Susan observes. "It's a jungle here. People drive in and are in awe."

Besides the distinctive natural setting, Pelican Cove also has a reputation as an artist community. "The majority of residents are retirees, and most have been involved in the arts—music, writing, sculpture. The Sarasota Jazz Club founders are from Pelican Cove, and we still have former



jazz performers who play here every Thursday during the winter season." Susan appreciatively observes, "I'm always amazed at the talent we have in here."

They pull from this reservoir of talent for their social events and for Pelican Cove University. "We have many ex-professors and lawyers and people who are very knowledgeable who volunteer to teach a class during the high season. A lot of snowbirds are here every year for the University. There are usually 25–30 classes offered, and some are overflowing, with 50–60 residents in attendance. For residents, the cost is five dollars total for everything, so you can go to a watercolor class followed by Italian II and that afternoon go to a current events or finance lecture," Susan reports. And this is in addition to the usual clubs—a coffee club that brings in a different Sarasota organization each month, and other clubs for interests such as cards, cooking, computer, dance, photography, tennis, yachting, and more. With three separate areas for kayak

racks, and the harbor for sailboats and motorboats up to 36 feet, the boating group includes nearly 200 residents.

#### Environmental Initiatives

Pelican Cove's primary environmental project has been the Brookhouse Ponds Project, designed to improve the quality of storm-water runoff making its way to Little Sarasota Bay. Some of this runoff originates in urban areas off-site, but makes its way to the Brookhouse Ponds and on to the bay by way of Clower Creek, which is designated as an impaired waterway. Through introducing upland and aquatic plants, reducing chemical use, and filtering runoff, the area has already seen measurable improvement. Cord grass, salvia, sunshine mimosa, water lilies, and other aquatic plants have been planted to reduce erosion and establish a natural plant border to reduce chemical use. Landscaping policies have been revised to help prevent fertilizers, pesticides, grass clippings, and any other debris from reaching waterways.



The impact of the new policies has been evaluated by Russ Hoffman of Beautiful Ponds. He found that the depth of clear water had doubled, and he reports, "The new plantings are helping settle the extremely fine sand and organic sediments. Dissolved oxygen in the pond is consistently high enough to support an appropriate fish population. We observe hundreds of small fish every time we inspect the pond." Success!

Susan reports, "The Bay and Water Committee used a survey of ten questions to test participants' knowledge of storm-water runoff and Best Management Practices (BMPs.) We first administered the quiz in November of 2007, as we began to build support for the project, and again in February of 2008. On the November survey, 29 percent of the respondents did not know that fertilizer is banned within ten feet of water bodies, but by May only one respondent answered incorrectly. Similarly, improved results were found for knowing the approximate percentage of rainwater that runs off Pelican Cove due to impervious surfaces." However, only half of the residents became aware of the fact that just one inch of rainfall on the property produces approximately two million gallons of water—but they are still enthusiastic supporters of the project!

Pelican Cove received grants from the Southwest Florida Water Management District and the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program. Susan credits board member Chuck Butterfield with providing direction in this area: "We owe our success in grants to him and Ann Spencer." Also, through the efforts of Butterfield the community has obtained a 501(c) designation to enable tax deductible gifts

to be made to the Pelican Cove Fund to Preserve Little Sarasota Bay and has been recognized for their efforts by the Keeping Sarasota County Beautiful organization.

Pelican Cove is involved with other communities in the Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Team (NEST), and Susan explains, "They look at us as an example for the rest of the county." Pelican Cove has provided tours of their pond area and advice on applying for grants and project design. One nearby community invited Pelican Cove residents to come help with similar planting at their property. Another association which came to observe figured out a solution—"They tried to hire our head of grounds away from us!" Susan exclaims.

Other projects have been aimed at water conservation. Several years ago, all toilets were replaced with water-saving models and Susan says, "Now it's time to consider updating those. Vendors are letting us use products on an experimental basis in common area buildings to assess their function and how much water they save." And, though the entire community recently had all plumbing replaced due to pinhole leaks, a summer project will be looking for any additional sources of water loss. Susan explains, "We're turning off the water for four hours and measuring each building to see if there's any water leakage at all. We're still losing enough water that it's a concern—both the money lost and

the water wasted." There is an ongoing effort to capture and recycle water and prevent storm water from entering the bay.

### **In the Community**

The Pelican Cove community is involved formally as a community in local issues affecting Pelican Cove, and as individuals serving both inside and outside the community on an independent basis. The community decided in 2005 "to engage more closely with government agencies and neighborhood associations, the better to preserve Pelican Cove for present and future generations." Susan outlines their goal: "To protect bordering waterways and address growing traffic congestion, the board adopted a policy to oppose local up-zoning proposals that lack proof of adequate supporting infrastructure." This means, "County Commissioners know Pelican Cove well. There may be a caravan of cars with 100 people. The case is set up and rehearsed. It's very polished—not a bunch of rabble rousers.

It's a very well-educated, articulate group of people making valid points." Pelican Cove has worked against re-zoning of two tracts on US 41, has assisted several facilities in environmentally-friendly expansion, and is working for roadway development in the area. Pelican Cove residents have also been very active in seeking for the county to reopen Midnight Pass. This was a channel connecting Little Sarasota Bay with the Gulf which was closed by individuals, and it was felt that the bay water quality was negatively impacted by the loss of the flushing action from the Gulf. However, Susan reports of this effort, "Pelican Cove was very involved and disturbed, but it's over. In May, Sarasota County said it was not willing to spend millions of dollars to open the pass."

The association provides forums for public officials and candidates to address residents. These opportunities are beneficial to both the speakers and residents. Susan observes, "We're a powerful voting block because we're the largest condominium in the county, with over 1200 residents. And since most of the residents are retirees, they are known to be in the age group with the highest voter turnout."

Within the community, an Evening Cultural Concert Series and morning Coffee Programs are sponsored by residents. These benefit both the hearers and the artists, with performers such as the Sarasota Opera Studio Artists, the Russian Solati Trio, and the Booker High School Vocal and Instrumental Jazz Performers. Susan notes, "A neighbor-to-neighbor program features volunteers within Pelican Cove who assist other residents who need transportation, errands run, or other short-term care." The group is trying to involve more people in volunteering to drive seniors who are finding transportation a challenge.

Individual volunteer work abounds, as many retirees have experience and time to donate. "Many of our residents are retired academics and contribute to the local school system as readers and tutors, and one has

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served as a school board member," says Susan. Other organizations in which residents have invested time include Habitat for Humanity, the library, the Sheriff's office, Project Lifesaver, small claims court, legal aid offices, hospitals, various Sarasota arts establishments, Ringling Museum, the Literacy Program, and more. Susan reports that the contest did raise their awareness of promoting individual service through the community. "This year we're going to put a form in one of the newsletters for residents to submit hours and locations of service. Also, we've decided to start posting volunteer possibilities on bulletin boards."

**With a great diversity of units and settings, Susan observes, "People are constantly looking for other people's units to buy. They're always looking for a more perfect view, or a place by the pool, by the tennis courts, on the creek, or watching the boats come in."**

To tackle this, Pelican Cove planned and executed EXPO 2009. All three clubhouses plus outdoor areas were utilized, local business sponsors were secured to avoid cost for residents, and news media provided coverage.

Susan summarizes, "EXPO 2009 afforded residents a unique opportunity to learn about board affairs, board advisory committees, clubs, and Pelican Cove University classes. Residents were able to watch demonstrations of dance and exercise groups, visit sculpture and art studios and the woodworking shop, and consider membership in the 40-plus resident-run clubs and organizations which featured displays. At sunset, a cookout was held outdoors followed by a jazz performance and dessert in the Pavilion." As might be expected, feedback indicated that the event was fun and exciting, and membership in clubs and participation in other activities also increased. As Susan says, "Everybody showed off," and the results were worth the work by 150 volunteers to pull everyone together.

### **Be Prepared**

Plans and preventive measures are in place at Pelican Cove to avoid trouble when possible and to deal with it when avoidance is impossible. For controlling access via land, a 24-hour security gatehouse logs all guest vehicles, which enter by invitation only, and fencing and heavy foliage surround the perimeter. A roving watchman provides additional security at night. Emergency phones are located at the six pools and the harbor, and the board is currently considering a digital, fiber-optic phone system for communication with residents for any warning/emergency alerts.

Controlling access and ensuring safety at the harbor frontage presents different challenges. Private property signs, video cameras, and a motion-detector light have been installed at the harbor entrance. Ladders, life rings, fire extinguishers, bilge pumps, and oil booms are

kept accessible, and annual boat inspections by Coast Guard Auxiliary officials are scheduled. AED/defibrillators are located at the Harbor Club and Pavilion building, with both volunteers and selected employees trained for response.

Pelican Cove's disaster plan was based on a template developed by Sarasota County's Recovery Chief, who also reviewed the completed plan. Assignments and organization address responsibilities before, during, and after a storm or other threatening situation. Six individuals in the community have become Community Emergency Response Team members and their skills will be utilized as part of Pelican Cove's first response if needed. The plan will be reviewed at least annually and a mock drill with a nearby community is planned.

### **Behind It All**

"The eleven committees are the backbone of Pelican Cove," says Susan, as that is where the ideas become plans and plans become action. But to get them done takes money—about \$5,000,000 per year. The nine-member board and the general manager, Kevin Richards, are who Susan credits with the successful control of expenses. Susan says, "Kevin is really on top of things in this economy. He and the Insurance Committee kept our insurance costs less than last year's through interviewing three companies and letting them bid against each other. From pool chemicals to roof

### **Spreading the Word**

Pelican Cove decided to go several steps further in expanding communication through the association with their EXPO 2009 event. Susan remarks, "We think we're doing a good job through our newspaper, bulletin boards, in-house 24-hour TV channel, and website, but it's amazing how many people don't know what's being offered to them."

shingles, Kevin goes out and gets bid after bid. We haven't had a maintenance fee increase in two years, so we're hoping we can set a record and make it three."

As winner of the environmental award, the community has a high concern for and awareness of their natural surroundings. As a result, Susan observes, "The Grounds Committee gets the most feedback and handles the most controversy. Everybody has a tree they never want to see cut down, even if it's diseased. Everybody has different ideas on what color and kinds of plants are best and what's invasive. Mike O'Byrne, the grounds/maintenance coordinator, does a remarkable job of trying to placate everyone and of keeping Pelican Cove lushly beautiful."

The Bay and Harbor Committee supports the boaters' interests and that section of the property. Though the harbor is being completely redone, the boaters have paid for these slips through their past dockage fees, and those proceeds will keep the rest of the community from being financially affected by the project.

Other committees handle insurance, personnel, building and facilities, and rules. Susan explains, "The rules constantly have to be enforced because you're living with 1200 other people." Recurring issues include improper use of common property, property modifications like shades extending past railings, traffic regulations,

rules for recycling garbage, and the need to clean fish properly at the harbor—"reinforcing common sense," according to Susan.

The Planning Committee enables Pelican Cove to look at the bigger picture, for environmental policies, facility needs, and more. They use a questionnaire to determine likes, dislikes, ages, interest, and trends in their community, and aim to stay in front of rather than behind their needs.

When someone moves at Pelican Cove, it's not necessarily goodbye. With a great diversity of units and settings, Susan observes, "People are constantly looking for other people's units to buy. They're always looking for a more perfect view, or a place by the pool, by the tennis courts, on the creek, or watching the boats come in." Once they've found Pelican Cove, though, moving up may not be moving out. ■

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