



community of excellence
finalist—communication



The Retreat at Seabbranch

Building on Strong Foundations

by Kathy Danforth

The Retreat at Seabbranch has advantages in location, house construction, and strong communication that contribute to a stable, satisfied community. Bill Cole, who retired from the building industry, has been board president since the turnover from the developer in 2004 and says, “It’s a wondrous place. People are really happy here.”

Location

The 555 homes of the Retreat at Seabbranch are located at the end of Seabbranch Boulevard, a three-mile drive off of Highway 1 in Martin

County. Six other associations are located along this welcoming entry, each a self-contained neighborhood, though they are joined together as a master association primarily for upkeep of the boulevard. The community is a peninsula that sticks out into Atlantic Ridge State Park, which will be wild forever—a very old-time Florida preserve area. If you look in a zoological book of Florida animals, everything that is in Florida is here. The chances of another area like this being developed are quite small because the building codes are stricter today and similar pieces of property are no longer available.

With all the birds and creatures of Florida at each resident's doorstep and backyard, the setting is magnificent, peaceful, quiet, and interesting. Some residents do get apprehensive when a snake, bobcat, or alligator is spotted, but there is an ongoing attempt to educate the community through newsletter articles and other means of communication to be tolerant of their presence. The residents are reminded that the wildlife was here before they were.



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Construction

The homes in the Retreat at Seabranh are poured concrete constructed by DiVosta Homes. A testament to this type of construction is that the community has lived through four hurricanes with very minor property damage. However, a number of residents did lose their pool screen enclosures that are outside the home's living area.

DiVosta has constructed approximately 40,000 homes in Florida, including two of the other neighborhoods on Seabranh Boulevard. The houses are of poured concrete and are like a bomb shelter. They have a set of steel concrete forms with cutouts for doors and windows, and channels for plumbing and wiring. He [DiVosta] had the forms made in Europe and pioneered this process in Florida. Cranes are needed to erect the forms and construction proceeds as an assembly-line kind of process. The wiring harnesses and plumbing are designed all in one module. From the time they started a house, residents could move in in 40 days.

By having a high volume, they were able to achieve houses that are almost soundproof, well-insulated, and safe from the elements. It's probably about the same cost as conventional construction, but the houses are stronger and more uniform, with a lot less problems. The house itself is a rectangle of solid poured concrete, and the inside is drywall on steel studs. Three styles are available at the Retreat, ranging from a two-bedroom home with about 1600 square feet up to a four-bedroom home with around 2800 square feet.

Communication

The Retreat was a finalist in the Communities of Excellence contest in the communications division. Association volunteers under the direction of the Communications Committee utilize a bi-monthly newsletter, website, bulletin boards, community television channel, town hall meetings, resident directory, email blasts, and open board meetings with published minutes to get information to and from the residents.

The newsletter is particularly popular, with hundreds of residents contributing articles on a wide variety of topics. The website provides information of a business nature, with a resident showcase for display of artwork. The clubhouse mail room—a mingling



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ground for the residents—is the home of five bulletin boards devoted to the Women’s Club, the Social Committee, the board and management, business cards of residents, and articles for sale. The bulletin boards are in locked cabinets and managed by the Communications Committee. In 2007, the community negotiated for a free channel through their cable provider as a regularly updated forum for meetings and activities, as well as another venue for displaying artwork by residents. A majority of residents have signed up to receive email notices when information needs to be disseminated quickly. Town hall meetings are held twice each year, offering community members a forum for open discussion. The board of directors is continually reaching out for ideas and suggestions. One suggestion that was implemented was designating five-minute parking spaces directly in front of the clubhouse for residents coming to pick up mail at the mailboxes.

The many paths of communication may spring from the board’s objective to be accessible. Bill recalls, “We’d only been here a few months when we had our turnover from the builder and I was elected president, and I didn’t know anybody. I went every Friday night for several months and sat in the clubhouse from seven to nine to meet people and welcome anyone who wanted to come and talk about anything. I had a friend in a

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community larger than this and he used to do that on Friday nights at his home, and I thought that was a pretty good idea.” Bill has encouraged all the board to publish their email addresses and phone numbers and to be available—a step to prevent small issues from growing.

Operation

The Retreat utilizes a management company that has Retreat resident Ron Barrow as the full-time on-site LCAM. The community has a clubhouse, tennis courts, and pool to maintain, with the Clubhouse and Recreation Committee always on the lookout for new things to do. The bulk of the community’s work is the upkeep of all of the landscaping and grounds throughout the 300-acre property. The association maintains the common grounds and also yards for all the residents. This job

takes 16 full-time workers, and the Retreat enjoys contracting the work out. Volume pricing is cheaper than any one of the residents could afford for the same level of service on their own. The yard care, cable television, alarm system, and use of the resort-style pool and gym are more economical than if they were secured individually. Relatively affordable living is part of the reason people live in the Retreat—the association fee is less than if you did all these things by yourself.

Each association along Seabranched Boulevard has its own amenities. The Retreat is fortunate that its next-door neighbor has a large golf course. Residents can drive their golf carts to this semi-private course, where they can have a membership or play by the day. It’s a nice amenity to have next door.

The Finance Committee at the Retreat is pleased to not be feeling the pinch that the current economy has created for many. Much of the reason is that the homes were built before the boom in 2006–7 and any investors from the beginning have already turned their properties over. In addition, many of the homeowners are year-round residents.

The community residents enjoy a variety of different clubs and service activities. Interest groups meet to focus on photography, bridge, poker, mah jongg, knitting, golf, art, and more. The Social Committee organizes a monthly



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themed event for the entire neighborhood. Over the last five years, the neighborhood Relay for Life Team has raised \$40,000 for the American Cancer Society. An outreach group has adopted a nearby school. Recently the neighborhood has formed the Retreat Assistance Network to help individuals in the community with any temporary help they may need. Residents of the Retreat have contributed time and money to the local women's shelter, library, hospital, and Meals-on-Wheels program, and more than 6,000 pounds of food has been donated to a local food bank.

The Architectural Review Committee has oversight of any changes to the outside of homes. They review plans for construction of pools, screen homes, and other proposed changes to the outside of the homes to ensure any additional construction to a home will meet the community standards. In addition, to assist owners in personalizing their yards in a style acceptable to the community standards, a list of approved plants that are non-invasive has been developed in conjunction with their landscaper and master gardeners in the association.

For disagreements involving compliance with governing documents, the Covenant Committee steps in. The Retreat is a deed-restricted community. Many people choose to live in such a community because they know it will be maintained and always look the same.

Certain rights are given up, but the community's sound finances and lack of problems more than compensate for this. Some people like association living; some don't.

Though they have sent out surveys soliciting input, Bill says, "People are not complaining." And why should they? Bill notes, "We haven't raised our association dues in five years and I think that we can do it another year. What's wrong with this picture? Nothing. The place looks great, we've got money in the bank, and we're not raising fees."

"This is a gorgeous property and the people are very friendly and warm," Bill observes. "People who go on vacation and come back can't wait to turn in on this beautiful boulevard and our property." The Retreat at Seabranh offers a welcoming haven to come home to, or to never leave! ■

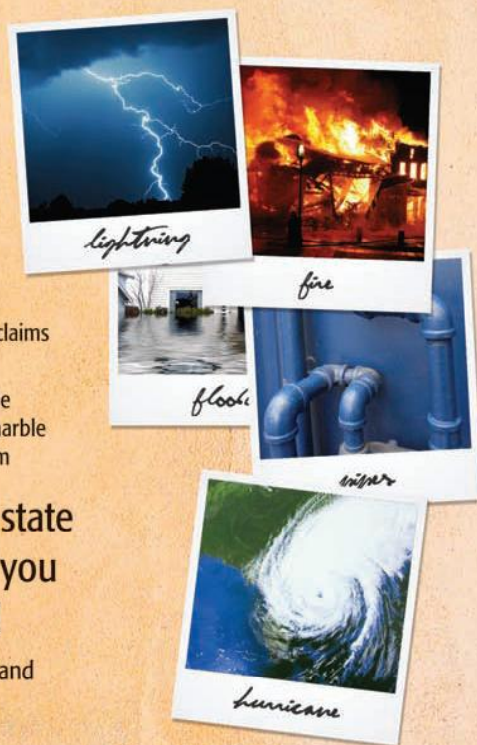
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