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A Web of their own East Manatee communities are opening up to the possibilities of Intranets

Betty Carroll

Herald Staff Writer

EAST MANATEE - The homemade and photocopied community newsletter, a labor of love by homeowner's association volunteers, may soon be giving way to powerful community Intranets that allow homeowners to find baby sitters, sign up to play bridge, search for lost pets, check out last night's Little League scores and order pizza.

The virtual village is beginning construction in Manatee - a result of the needs of people who are moving into new homes in planned communities. Stan Sabuk, president of the Manatee Association of Homebuilders, confirms that people are demanding high-speed computer connections for their new homes - and that builders are listening.

Bill Roberts, senior vice president of Resident Interactive, an Atlanta-based company that sets up community Intranets - portions of the Internet sectioned off specifically for one group of users - concurs.

"Builders really like this concept since it is the next amenity after the golf course, pool and clubhouse that people are looking at. The high speed connections and wired, interactive capabilities are very attractive to new people moving into a community from somewhere else," Roberts said.

Raj Doraisamy, a Sarasota county resident who is CEO of Florida Communities Online, said, "People are not just buying bricks and mortar. They are buying a lifestyle."

He believes the next frontier for community Web sites is true functionality where people can log on and pay bills, make appointments with small businesses, check the community calendar for meetings and deal with community maintenance and service requests.

"We have a background in property management and we saw that problems in communities almost always were due to lack of communications. Soon the management of a community will be on the Web site. And that will help resolve many problems," Doraisamy said.

"The biggest complaints have to do with maintenance or a neighbor going against a deed restriction."

Ted Pinckowitz, CEO of Neighborhood Link, Inc., a company that has sets up corporate-sponsored Web sites for community use, said, "Communities seem to be either organized or disorganized. If they are organized they have places where you can check covenants, local events and items of interest. If they are not organized, the way they get active is over an issue that is controversial."

Laurie Evans, membership director at University Park Country Club, agrees that UPCC residents galvanized on one big issue with the help of e-mail.

"The fact that we have a TV channel and the ability for residents to e-mail each other contributed to some of the discussion when we began the process of changing from a developer-owned club to an owner-equity club last fall," she said.

"The ability to communicate that way sometimes added to misconceptions but also provided the opportunity for management to help clear up those misconceptions."

University Park Country Club, like many other planned community Web sites, has an area that is password-protected for residents. Between 60 and 75 percent of residents are online, according to club records.

Lakewood Ranch just completed a homeowner survey showing that 94 percent of residents are online.

Heritage Harbour, a new community that held its grand opening in July, said a community Intranet is on the drawing board.

"We've had this in the plans for a year," said Joy DuPree, vice president of sales.

Other local developments or groups of residents in developments have either set up their own sites or Intranet or are in discussion stages. For example, Bill Greenfield, a local realtor who lives in River Club, owns riverclubonline, a community Web site that is not connected with the management of River Club. He also owns and operates a site for Lake Sarasota, lakesarasotaonline.

The community sites are communications vehicles for people who are not physically able to attend homeowner's association meetings. As Pinkowitz points out, people who may feel a little too shy to stand up in a public meeting and make a comment often will send an e-mail.

Seasonal residents could use community Intranets, Web sites and e-mail to keep up with neighborhood news while they are away. Some communities in other areas have their homeowners' association meetings videotaped and available to watch either in real time or later, ideal for seasonal residents.

A study just released by the Internet and American Life Project of the Pew Research Center shows that the Internet is becoming an increasingly important tool for researching housing options. Forty million Americans, one third of all Internet users, have looked online for information about a place to live. The number of people who are hunting for houses online has increased by two thirds since March 2000, when the project first began surveying people about this topic.

People who are planning to move can get a good idea of what a community is like by logging on to a community site and surfing around. Some sites that have password protection for their residents will allow visitors for a short time or will have most of the links available to the public.

While some communities in other parts of Florida and the nation have already set up sophisticated Intranets that allow their residents to interact with each other electronically, developers of planned communities in East Manatee have moved more slowly.

Lakewood Ranch management has spent nearly two years investigating how best to set up a system. Polly Webb, vice president of marketing for Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, said, "This is a subject that is near and dear to my heart."

She said Lakewood Ranch management is in the process of deciding which company to use.

"We are looking at powerful programs that are intensively interactive. They start from the bottom up - that is, with the residents," she said.

Lakewood Ranch is looking closely at a community Intranet concept that is based on a powerful database system like Oracle. This system would allow for lots of interaction, much more so than a traditional Web site.

"This is not mandatory. There is no tax or cost. And we would have stations set up so people who do not have Internet access could keep up with what is going on. We certainly don't want to force anything on anyone and we are going to be conducting focus groups of residents who are technologically very savvy to see what it is that people want," Webb said.

Thursday, Sept 5th 2002

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