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Lakewood Ranch turns into Digital Village

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LAKWOOD RANCH - Starting today, residents of this master-planned community will be able to make arrangements for a babysitter, join social groups and civic organizations, RSVP at Ranch events and receive updates tailored to individual interests.

And that's before breakfast.

The East Manatee community is launching its newest amenity, the Digital Village at Lakewood Ranch.

Information, communication abilities and available services within Lakewood Ranch have been put together in a prepackaged, secure Web site intended to enhance the lifestyles of those living within the community.

The technology behind the Digital Village lies in software created by the Atlanta-based Resident Interactive Inc. Ultimately, about \$6 million and around 20,000 man hours would be needed to recreate the intranet software, said Bill Roberts, Resident Interactive's chief operating officer.

An intranet, as defined by Roberts, is a second-generation, interactive, secure Web site that requires a login.

"It's intended to disseminate information to like-minded people," he said. "It produces such a fantastic synergy, using the Internet as a communications platform, that transcends time and distance."

The Internet's original popularity came about from people's interest in communicating with and obtaining information from every corner of the world, Roberts said. The only place for the Internet to go was more local. The Digital Village is being described as "ultra-local."

For Ranch residents, it will be like reading "Around the Ranch," - Lakewood Ranch's monthly newspaper - updated every day, plus a couple million other options to boot.

New residents will be able to learn the ins and outs of Lakewood Ranch life and make some acquaintances with a few mouse clicks.

"Your first week in the neighborhood, you're looking for good schools or good doctors," Roberts said. "We provide an environment where all of that natural interaction happens quicker."

The application was designed with both computer-savvy and novice operators in mind, said Corrina Decker, the site administrator for Digital Village.

In an interview, she made it clear that it was the only authorized Lakewood Ranch Web site for residents. Copy cats have popped up that have confused people living in the master-planned community, she said, and those sites should not be confused with mgriswold@bradentonherald.com<http://www.lakewoodranchresidents.com/>.

"This is a tremendous communications tool," Lakewood Ranch spokeswoman Lisa Rubinstein said. "It'll really keep everybody up to date on what's happening."

The possibilities with the new system appear endless. Betty Waterfield and some fellow Ranch residents set out to start a garden club.

"We have all kinds of aspirations that our club can teach us many things, to be cognizant of how things are supposed to be grown in Florida," Waterfield said.

The intranet makes communication instantaneous among group members or for those interested in joining, she said.

"It gives you quick and easy access to everyone else and to what's going on around the ranch," she said. "What really impressed me was how user-friendly this is. Even if you aren't really, really computer literate, you're still able to get in and do things and still find the information you want. Which I think is great."

The Digital Village will continue to evolve over time to meet the changing needs of its users and be equipped with the latest technology, said both Roberts and Decker.

Lakewood Ranch has become the poster child for how to prepare a community for the implementation of such an intranet system, Roberts said.

"Among all of our clients across the country, they are probably going to be the most successful," he said. "We're just tickled to death with how it's turned out."

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