

CASE STUDY

HERON'S FOREST

CATEGORY Green development
Natural Resource Conservation

LOCATION Pensacola, Florida

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SYNOPSIS Heron's Forest is a residential development on the west side of Escambia County in Pensacola, Florida, which was established in 1998. Because of the natural beauty of the site, the developer decided to preserve as much of the natural environment as possible. The site includes an ancient burial ground for an Indian Chief, now part of a designated wetlands conservation area. It is isolated, protected, and contains healthy forest, including live oaks, sand pines, hickory, and magnolia. The development's topography varies from 6 to 31 feet above sea level and includes some rolling hills on each side of a small creek, which is unusual for this area. The property is surrounded on three sides by the US Navy Trout Point Watchable Wildlife Area that includes 6,000 feet of white sandy beach, to which residents have access. The residents of the community formed an active Property Owners Association that participates in the protection, restoration, and management of their surrounding natural environment.

SITUATION Florida's population is rapidly increasing and open space is quickly disappearing. Usually when a development is constructed, the land is cleared completely of trees and vegetation, which greatly impacts natural resources, and increases stormwater runoff and hurricane damage. Once trees are cleared, even minimally, the remaining trees lose the protection of the heavily forested area and are more susceptible to storm damage. Every year tropical storms and hurricanes (such as the most recent category 4 storm Hurricane Ivan), sweep through the region causing damage due to high winds and flooding. Clearing lots for development only worsens the effects.

PROJECT APPROACH The developer's main goals for Heron's Forest were environmental compatibility and preservation of open space and the natural environment. To monitor the construction sites and better control the outcome, he maintained a one-on-one relationship with the builders or their superintendents while in the subdivision. He hired his own crew to do a great deal of the work, including clearing, dirt work, roadwork, all landscaping excluding design, all clean up and dressing, and the majority of all drainage work. Most of the work was done by hand and small equipment, rather than large, motorized equipment, to have less of an impact and maintain the environmental compatibility. Although his approach increased time and labor costs, it allowed him to have enough control to ensure proper alternative clearing and grading techniques to maximize tree preservation. An arborist and landscape architects educated the work crews and selected builders so that they would hold the knowledge necessary to be able to implement this low-impact approach. While clearing lots, crews paid great attention to the preservation of tree coverage on the greatest amount of space possible, only clearing the footprint of each house. In addition, landscaping agreements required that additional trees be added between the houses and the streets, and encouraged the use of native plants. To ensure success, the developer researched the market, gathering information that showed that potential buyers desire security, greenspace, and on-site recreation. This is a unique aspect of this community as other subdivisions in the area contain few to no trees.



RESULTS/ IMPACTS

From an aerial view, the development at Heron's Forest is not even visible. Of approximately 83 acres, 25 acres are preserved as greenspace, 8 acres are preserved as wetlands, and 30% of the entire property is either greenspace between homes, common areas, recreational trails, or open space. Rather than lying adjacent to other lots, most lots back up to greenspace, common areas, or the wetlands conservation area. The developer successfully avoided impacts on wetlands and trees by intentionally incorporating the uplands and wetlands into the plan from the start of the process. As a result, he met his goals:

1. Provide sense of privacy, security and spaciousness; all but 3 lots back up to a perpetually encumbered greenway.
2. All green spaces interconnect, providing access routes throughout the community and to the Navy's Trout Point Preserve. These greenspaces are enhanced with the back 20 feet of each lot left natural and the removal of trees highly controlled. These areas on the lots are called greenbelts.
3. Although some habitat was "displaced", it was not lost, and efforts on site to keep pets caged, leashed, or fenced are in place.

Because of the healthy tree canopy, Hurricane Ivan did only minimal damage compared to other communities in the region. Due to the fact that most of the trees are closer to the homes, they tended to lean into roofs rather than fall from farther distances, causing greater damage. The residents manage the Property Owners Association, which has an active board and a positive relationship with their Navy neighbors. Community members play a large role in continuing to manage and preserve the natural resources surrounding their homes, and feel a great sense of ownership for their community. The homeowners use and maintain the walking trails throughout the community, which are restricted as conservation easements as part of the mitigation plan.

PARTNERS

Heron's Forest Development Co. hired Reece, Hoopes, and Fincher from Atlanta, which served as both the land planners and landscape architects for the project.

FUNDING

Appraisers initially hesitated to support the development. The location near the Navy Base and a large retired naval population helped to contribute to their eventual buy-in. Even though the construction approach cost 50-75% more, the preserved environmental integrity of the area added value to the property and the buyers accepted the increased cost. 184 lots of varying, smaller than the norm sizes, sold with an initial multi-lot builder pricing at \$44,500, which increased to \$64, 500 in two years. Home prices started at about \$200,500 and are now about \$300,000.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

The greatest key to success is that the developer included the goal of preservation in the plan from the beginning of the project and ensured that the work crews were educated and implemented the practices. Even more education focusing on native landscaping would have been beneficial, as well as an education program for homeowners. Conducting market research provided information for the building community that demonstrated that this type of development is indeed marketable. In addition, from the start of the project the developer forged a positive relationship with the neighboring Naval Base, which the residents continue to foster, contributing to the success of the community. The creation and involvement of the Property Owners Association is a key component that leads to community ownership, stewardship, and long-term sustainability and preservation. For future projects, the developer would encourage even more interaction between new residents and the homeowners association. An additional idea is to create a bulletin board to promote native landscaping, and to provide new ideas, education, and resource sharing, particularly among residents new to the area.

SOURCES

- Powerpoint Presentation, Eleanor Godwin, Heron's Forest Development Co.
- Heron's Forest Property Owners Association, www.hfpoa.com