

A North Carolina association's active, passionate residents make a large community seem small.

By Kim Fernandez



Fairfield Harbour Property Owners Association, just outside of New Bern, N.C., may be a large-scale community, but it sure feels small thanks to its dedicated homeowners, vibrant clubs and a plethora of activities.

First built in 1975, Fairfield Harbour sits on the Neuse River and consists of 1,400 single-family homes, 207 timeshare units, 24 townhomes and 152 condominiums on 2,000 acres. The community has 26 miles of roads and features restaurants, several marinas, a golf course, tennis courts and a handful of businesses.

Residents, many of whom are retirees, are immersed in the gated community and the area around it, supporting more than 75 nonprofits that range from the Wounded Warrior Project to the Neuse Riverkeeper Foundation.

It's not always all wine and roses. The community's Shoreline Golf Course, which was one of two courses inside the

gates, closed in 2008 for financial reasons. Left unused, the course quickly became overgrown, irritating residents and becoming a significant point of contention, especially for owners with property fronting the former greens.

Fairfield Harbour seems to have bounced back from the course closure. The association has worked to bring the former course back to life for other uses and has taken proactive steps to placate those who bought homes by the course.

OVER A BRIDGE

Fairfield Harbour lies over a bridge and is essentially out there by itself. The remote, water-surrounded location really seems to foster a sense of community.

The association has more clubs and activities than most properties its size. At last count, there were nearly 40 organizations on site specializing in everything from golf, Bible study and computers to

fishing, boating, line dancing and bridge. Many of the clubs have dedicated websites, and nearly all are promoted and covered in the community's monthly newspaper, the *Fairfield Harbour Beacon*.

The clubs are a great way for residents to get to know each other and have become an unintentional selling point for properties. While Fairfield Harbour's location often draws in residents, the sense of community keeps them there.

"Many times, someone who is a prospective buyer will look at the website and become more interested because of clubs," says Larry Knapp, association board president. He adds that Fairfield Harbour has the largest base of volunteers in Craven County.

"The county celebrated its 300th anniversary last year and made a video about our volunteers that's now on its website to help show prospective businesses how active the area is," Knapp says.



CHRIS SKROTSKY, board vice president of finance and treasurer, says there's a good reason so many of her neighbors volunteer regularly: They enjoy both the work and the opportunity to tell others about where they live.

"In this community, people are genuinely happy to be here," she says. "They're also happy to go out into the county and let people know Fairfield Harbour is here. It's a way of saying, 'I like to visit your community, and I hope you'll come and see mine.'"

Skrotsky says residents are active as individuals and groups. "There's a shared mentality of happiness and cooperation," she says.



Another benefit is that the volunteer work helps transplanted residents get to know others. And because almost everyone at Fairfield Harbour came from somewhere else, it's a motivation to get involved.

"We have a lot of people who are looking for new friendships and exercising their rights to go out and enjoy their lives," says Mystré Van Horn, CMCA, AMS, Fairfield Harbour community manager. "If there's something they're seeking out—an interest—they can do that here. We're associated with a whole bunch of different volunteer organizations—soup kitchens, churches and other things."

Van Horn, who works for Community Association Services, Inc., has managed the community since 2011. Not long after, she moved there too.

John Stone, AMS, PCAM, president and CEO of Community Association Services, says the first thing that struck him about Fairfield Harbour, besides its beauty, was the active residents. He believes they are far more engaged than many other communities he's managed.

"It's a very passionate place," he says. "Whatever

is going on, people feel strongly about it. There's never any middle ground."

He believes enthusiasm and activism help keep the community well maintained.

COURSE CONCERNS

Board members say residents are generally happy, but strife crept in when the golf course closed.

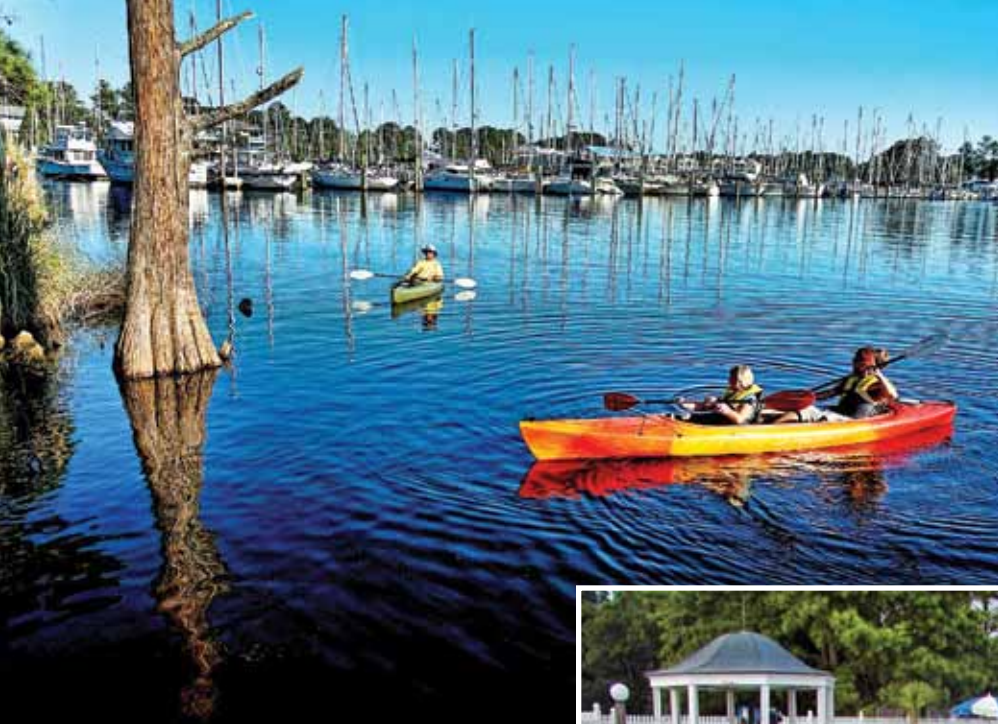
Until 2008, Fairfield Harbour offered two independently owned golf courses. A combination of factors led one of the two courses to shut down abruptly that year.

"Golf has been on a national decline for a while," Stone says. "Add to that a recession, and people aren't playing as much golf as they were years ago. The owner felt the best business decision for him was to close one course and operate the other."

But owners bought homes with a maintained golf course in their backyards. When you're living there for 30 years, and all of a sudden the course isn't maintained, you're probably not very happy about that, management explains. Some took to the Internet to vent their frustrations.

"People were very upset," recalls Van Horn. "For a while, we had 6 to 7 feet of weeds growing on that closed course, and that was unacceptable. It took a while for us to get to the point that we hammered the owners of the course enough to make them deal with it."





Community Association Services mowed the course, billed its owners and sued for damages; a judge ruled in the association's favor.

The association also attempted to buy the golf course, but a court ruled that while the association could purchase the course, it couldn't use assessments to pay for it. "What are we going to do, have a bake sale? I never quite got where the judge was going with that," says Stone.

The course is still an issue, but Knapp says the board is doing everything it can legally. For now, the course is mowed and maintained as public space. Residents use it for walking, biking, exploring and even cross-country skiing during a freak snowstorm this winter.

HARBOUR WORK

Fairfield Harbour's size and variety of features, including canals and waterways, make community operations and governance complicated, but its active, involved population helps.

The board meets twice a month and includes seven elected voting members. The association has a \$2 million budget funded completely by assessments, which average about \$60 per month per owner. The community's biggest expenses typically include road maintenance and storm-water reclamation. Rain can't, after all, go flooding into the canals off paved surfaces.

The community's six maintenance workers do everything from mowing to road striping. It also employs security

guards—three who are certified as emergency medical technicians.

"That's big," says Van Horn. "Residents may call 911 for an emergency, but it goes over our radio system, and our first responders are dispatched immediately. Our longest time for (in-person) response has been three minutes."

Stone says Fairfield Harbour isn't like most gated communities because it is so far away from a lot of municipal services. "It has to be pretty independent," he says.

The board is aware of that and prides itself in using each person's background to the community's advantage.

"The membership here comes from all walks of life," says Van Horn.

Knapp, for example, was an English professor. The board also has former secretaries, doctors of divinity and psychia-

trists. "The dynamics change with each new member who joins the board, but Larry makes sure every person's voice is heard," says Van Horn.

Stone is continually impressed with Fairfield Harbour's active, dedicated and involved residents.

"There are a lot of articles written about apathy in community associations and there being no interest and getting people to come to meetings," he says. "That is not Fairfield Harbour. People come to the meetings, and they feel strongly about their home. ... People come from all over the country to live there, but they have an amazing sense of community." **CG**

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