

10th Anniversary
FLORIDA
MUNICIPAL ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



Volunteers paint the exterior of Oakhurst homes. The local Lowe's donated the paint.

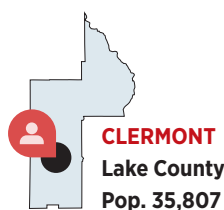
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CITY OF CLERMONT

CITY SPIRIT AWARD

The Oakhurst Project

Clermont changes its highest-crime neighborhood to crime-free

by Doris Bloodsworth
City of Clermont



The **City of Clermont**, located in the center of the state, prides itself on being “the Choice of Champions,” due to its reputation as a training ground for Olympians and other elite athletes. City leaders like to say the community celebrates “the champion spirit in everyone.”

There was one neighborhood where that aspirational slogan fell short. It is a 14-duplex development named Oakhurst. For years, the neighborhood had the city’s highest crime rate, with complaints about assaults, drug dealing, noise, suspicious activity and code-enforcement violations.

Traditional law enforcement action and community policing seemed to have no effect on the crime statistics or, more importantly, on the deteriorating quality of life of the residents.

“It had become routine to go, arrest and stand by for the next call,” said **Clermont Police Officer David Colon**.

It was a stark contrast to what the city and developer had in mind when the housing project opened in 1993 to great fanfare in a historic neighborhood. “Our objective is to offer something to people who are renting now and really should be owning their own homes,” the developer said about the new development.

Over time, however, some of the homes became rentals with 10 to 20 residents in three-bedroom units. Original owners feared for their safety, as crime and neglect gripped the once-beautiful homes shaded by a canopy of oaks.

For Colon, it was personal. He remembered what it was like as a youth growing up in a crime-weary neighborhood in South Florida.

“I remember looking out the window and seeing a man slap a woman and calling her obscenities,” Colon said.

The problems in Oakhurst spread throughout south Lake County and beyond. Besides drug dealing, the crime, noise, trash in the yards and neglected exteriors affected neighbors’ property values. Original homeowners, such as **Ruby McCoy**, ran from their cars to their front doors, afraid for their lives.

In January 2017, Colon began an initiative called the Oakhurst Project. While police continued to protect lives and property, they aggressively stepped up non-enforcement activities that included hosting potluck meals, training young adults for job interviews, pressure-cleaning the homes and painting them, and engaging local businesses to provide food and holiday gifts.

Colon also met with landlords to get support in enforcing rental agreements.

While trust and conditions were on the upswing, not everything went perfectly. Midway through the project, on June 11, 2017, there was a homicide in the middle of the parking lot. A 30-year-old male who did not live at Oakhurst suffered a single gunshot to the head and died in the parking lot.

“At first, it seemed like a real setback,” Colon said.

Instead, detectives received an outpouring of support and cooperation in identifying two suspects who were arrested. It was a wake-up call for everyone. Police stepped up their efforts, and residents became more engaged than ever. More than 150 volunteers, some from as far away as Massachusetts, spent over 300 hours helping beautify the neighborhood.

It was truly a community effort. The mayor, police chief and members of the Police Department volunteered. They reached out to local businesses, neighborhood churches, Oakhurst residents and nonprofits, such as Habitat for Humanity, which referred the volunteers from Massachusetts. They were looking for a project during their visit to Florida.

Police calls decreased dramatically, and soon there were zero calls for service. It has stayed that way for nearly a year.



A group of volunteers from Massachusetts with some of the Oakhurst residents after a day of cleaning and painting.



The City of Clermont is presented with the City Spirit Award.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CITY OF CLERMONT

The Oakhurst Project provides several lessons:

1. Intractable crime can be reduced.
2. Effective programs do not have to be expensive. The Oakhurst Project cost the city \$0. Local businesses provided financial and in-kind support.
3. Business and faith stakeholders care and want to be engaged.
4. Absentee landlords will participate when they see there is a plan that not only helps residents but benefits landlords as well.

Today, residents of the Oakhurst homes include a nurse and teacher. Several cars sport bumper stickers touting “Terrific Kids” attending neighborhood schools. The project that was supposed to last one year is ongoing, with plans for landscaping donated by a local nursery. The residents want to paint a mural at the entrance to welcome visitors and new residents.

For McCoy, affectionately known to her neighbors as “Miss Ruby,” it means she can get out of her car and walk, not run, to her front door without fear.

“I can go to bed and get a good night’s sleep,” she said.

Doris Bloodsworth, APR, is communications director for the City of Clermont. 



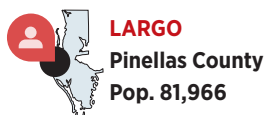
PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CITY OF LARGO

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AWARD

Largo Freecycle Event

Waste reduction and environmental equity through a pop-up marketplace

by **Laura C. Thomas**
City of Largo



Conveniently located just a stone's throw from beautiful beaches and surrounded by Pinellas County's natural settings, **Largo** boasts being the fourth largest city in Tampa Bay. Valued green spaces and access to leisure services are at the heart of what residents and businesses value about the community. Part of what makes these parks and the community beautiful is what you don't see: waste.

Largo Solid Waste staff members work hard to keep waste out of sight and out of mind. The quick nature of waste removal globally has led to issues such as lack of landfill space, increased environmental risks and growing financial burdens. Without a connection to the fate of their own waste, populations are inclined to trash more, reuse less and are likely to fail to see the true value of the products used every day.

To address the mounting issue of waste and to foster a long-term commitment to reuse and sustainability in the community, the City of Largo created a **Freecycle Event**. Using the theme of *Freecycle.org*, city staff collected gently used items that were donated by the community such as clothing, books, school supplies and kids' toys to create a massive marketplace. The community was invited to the event marketplace, where they were given a recycled, reusable bag to "shop" for free. This event helped to provide needed resources for residents and to keep items out of the landfill.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUCCESS

Initially, the marketplace was expected to take up one large room with a few dozen residents donating and shopping. The first year of the event, however, nearly



The City of Largo is presented with the Environmental Stewardship Award.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CITY OF LARGO

225 residents participated, which far exceeded expectations. The second year was an even larger success with more than 650 shoppers arriving in under one hour, completely selling out the event marketplace and reaching capacity inside an entire ballroom at the Largo Public Library.

Among the items collected in the first two years were more than 1,000 books, nearly 300 stuffed animals and kids' toys and over 4,000 articles of clothing. The number of books alone was enough to save an estimated two metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions. As the Freecycle Event continues, Largo will continue to reduce negative environmental impacts such as the harvesting of raw materials, local greenhouse gas emissions and the use of finite resources such as water and oil.

ENVIRONMENTAL EQUITY

The event also promotes environmental equity by removing financial barriers to needed supplies such as teaching materials, holiday gifts, children's clothing and more. Providing an equitable distribution of resources helps to create a more resilient community and empowers residents across community groups.

Additionally, participants are encouraged to see value in common items they may no longer need. Instead of throwing something into the trash, this event encourages residents to seek out alternative methods of disposal such as reusing, recycling or donating. This change in mindset furthers the city's efforts in

creating a sustainable and environmentally equitable community.

ADAPTABILITY

Any organization looking to promote environmental sustainability can create this unique and exciting experience for its community. The event can be run by staff or volunteers and can take place in nearly any space. While the Largo Freecycle Event consisted of one day for residents to donate and a second day to shop, it can be set up as a one-day event or even adjusted to a longer, more permanent event where space is available. Specific items can even be requested if a certain group or cause is being supported. Freecycle Events should ultimately be tailored to meet the needs of each community.

The City of Largo, with its strategic focus on sustainability, offers these services to serve the vision for the community. Largo's new brand highlights the importance of the natural environment and inspires the community to connect to our parks and green spaces, naturally.

Largo also recently adopted its first organizationwide sustainability plan, the Largo Environmental Action Plan (LEAP), further reducing the city's impact on our natural resources. These efforts help to build a framework of sustainable success for the community and pave the way for remarkable programs such as the Largo Freecycle Event.

Laura C. Thomas is sustainability coordinator for the City of Largo. **QC**

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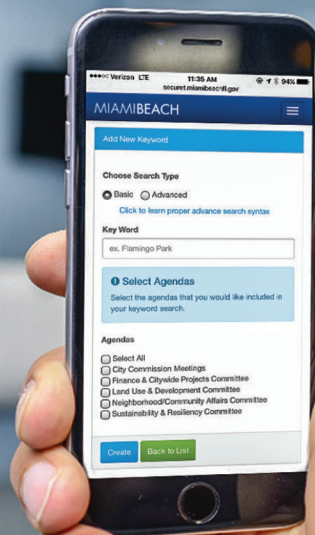
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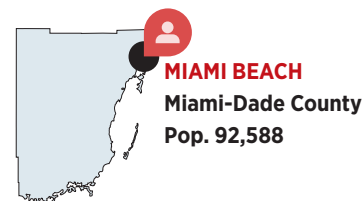
GRAPHIC COURTESY OF THE CITY OF MIAMI BEACH

FLORIDA CITIZENSHIP AWARD

Good Government Is Transparent

Miami Beach creates a system to connect with residents

by Taylor Hall
City of Miami Beach



Government is a balancing act. It's an ongoing conversation between residents and politicians, a focus on both community and legislation, and a yin and yang of action and information.

Engaged and active residents are the core of a city's makeup and the key to its success. In the spirit of encouraging public participation, the **City of Miami Beach** is equipping residents with the proper knowledge to get involved.

Encouraging individuals to take a ready role in the municipal process, the Miami Beach City Commission unanimously passed the **Citizen's Bill of Rights**. Part of the **Miami Beach Code**, the Citizen's Bill of Rights provides for a right to be heard before the City Commission or any city agency, board or department about an issue, request or controversy within the city's jurisdiction. It also provides that people entitled to notice of a city hearing will be informed in a timely manner about the time, place and nature of the hearing and the legal authority that is related to the hearing.

In continuation of this effort, **MB Resident Connect** was created by the city on May 6, 2017. Providing an innovative and effective way to carry out the ordinance, MB Resident Connect is an

electronic notification system that alerts city stakeholders on topics of interest to them.

Then, in July 26, 2017, the Miami Beach City Commission unanimously passed a resolution pursuant to the Citizens' Bill of Rights to provide for targeted neighborhood notices, timely opportunities for input and procedural fairness in quasi-judicial hearings. It is titled the **Residents' Right to Know Ordinance**.

Users of MB Resident Connect can set up multiple keywords and phrases and be alerted via email when one of their subjects is published on a public meeting agenda. Categories can range anywhere from public infrastructure improvements and private real estate developments to the commercialization of a public park and a resolution of a registered neighborhood association. With further refinement of the city's noticing process, residents are not only messaged about agenda items, but they are alerted when things of interest to neighborhoods undergo changes that aren't necessarily discussed at a public hearing.

Before MB Resident Connect, residents had to rely on word of mouth to hear about city issues. Now, residents can easily find and follow initiatives that affect them.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CITY OF MIAMI BEACH

“It is very difficult for residents to keep track of topics that concern or interest them, and to know when things are being discussed so that they can have input and be part of the process,” said **Miami Beach Commissioner John Elizabeth Alemán**, who spearheaded the initiative. “It is overly time-consuming and unreasonable for residents to review all of the agendas for all of the public meetings to determine when and where their topics of interest will be heard or discussed at a city meeting. Our MB Resident Connect system allows residents to receive email alerts before the things they care about are discussed and decided, so everyone can be a resident activist and shape the future of Miami Beach.”

“For people that are proactive in searching for information like myself, the program is great at presenting relevant and upcoming matters, while making it easier for me to follow current initiatives,” raved Miami Beach resident and community activist **Beth Emerson**. “I’m a firm believer that staying connected is the key to a happy and healthy life.”


Since its launch, the system has been vital in encouraging public notice and public participation. It has inspired people of all ages to get involved in the municipal process and make their voices heard.

The system was built for residents, but it is easily accessible and free of charge for anyone. Numerous people have benefitted from the program including students, businesses and other interested parties within and outside of the city who are curious about projects or proposed ordinances.

It is every municipality’s responsibility to consider a resident’s quality of life in their choices.

“Each municipality is also responsible to encourage, empower and educate residents so that effective legislation may be passed and made,” added **Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber**. “Including citizens in the conversations early on, keeping them consistently updated and making information easily accessible is key to passing effective policy.”

To access the platform, visit MBResidentConnect.com.

Taylor Hall is public information specialist for the City of Miami Beach. 



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