

Umbrella group strengthens its online presence

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When Ken Lassiter came in as president of the influential umbrella group for 88 developments in western Boynton Beach and Lantana, he and other leaders decided it needed a more important website than the one they had parked on a shared server for years.

"Everyone's Web site looked the same," he said.

Ken wanted the new site to reflect the mission of the Coalition of Boynton West Residential Communities: Provide commercial-free information and serve as a gatekeeper for that stretch of suburban Palm Beach County.

"We see the site as something for the wider community," he said. "We represent the whole area, not just the members."

Coalition and committee meetings are public, but only member communities can vote, which is key. Started more than 30 years ago to control urban sprawl, COBWRA has become much more effective and way more powerful than its founder Dr. Richard Carrington could have ever dreamed.

With 100,000 residents under its wing, it represents such a big voting bloc that politicians listen and make reports at the monthly meetings. Developers preview their plans before the Growth Management Committee to make sure COBWRA is on board before county commissioners see them.

"The whole idea of COBWRA is managing growth and the quality of life in our community," said Lisa Riddle, the new Web designer and Webmaster.

Lisa surfaced through Sharon Geltner, who does volunteer public relations for the group. Lisa is her neighbor in Country Fair. A property manager for Banyan Property Management, she's self-taught and has a track record for Web design. Ken said she agreed to do it for free.

Lisa was surprised that a group that size didn't have a bigger presence on the Internet. "You couldn't find COBWRA when you searched for it," she said.

She and a committee got to work on the plan for the redesign in June, presented a breakdown to the executive board in August and did periodic demos at the monthly meetings. Their biggest objective was ease of use.

"We wanted a user-friendly site ... point and click and you find the information. Easy to read with a large font," she said. "People don't have a lot of patience to dig things out."

The site has been up since Nov. 18 at <http://www.cobwra.org>, and they're getting good feedback. What may get the biggest number of hits is the list of member communities, a database for anyone trying to sell something. Ken is adamant that his members are protected from marketing. There are no ads on the site.

"Our members have always been public, so we will have a private side to the site for presidents and delegates only to prevent outsiders from using the website for commercial purposes," he said.

Plans also include cross-referencing developments and elected officials so people can find their politicians. "Users can go to their website, and they can post on our Web site," Lisa said.

She plans to keep adding community resources and will update the site at least once a week. People can e-mail her events open to the public. "The calendar is a great feature," she said. "And ideally, if someone has relatives in town, they can say, 'Let's go to that nature center on Jog Road.'"

That would be Green Cay, and it's on there.

Marci Shatzman covers the adult communities in western Boca Raton, Delray Beach, Boynton Beach, Lake Worth and in Wellington. You can read and comment on her columns at <http://www.sunsentinel.com> and reach her at granddame5@comcast.net.

