

Hot Springs Village

by JG Walker

*Nearing its 50th Birthday,
This Arkansas Community Makes a Plan for the Future*



With 26,000 total acres—the equivalent of 40 square miles or nearly twice the land area of Manhattan—Hot Springs Village in Arkansas is America's largest gated community.

Established in 1970 by Little Rock businessman John Cooper Sr. and developed by his family-owned Cooper Communities Inc. (CCI), Hot Springs Village was envisioned to be a major retirement community and golf destination in a central Arkansas area that had neither.

But Cooper was also an environmentalist who wrote into the original Village covenants that at least 40% of the development had to remain forever as common areas or otherwise undeveloped land. And by 1975, as the first few hundred lots were sold and retirement homes were

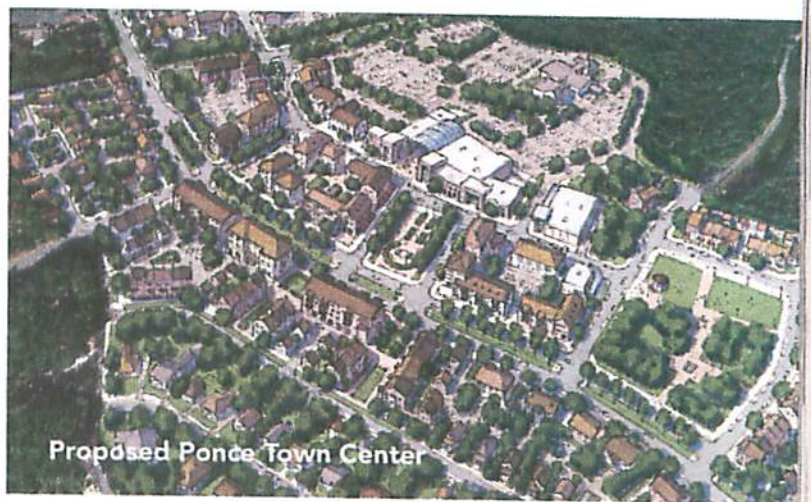
built, CCI helped to create the Hot Springs Village Property Owners Association (HSVPOA) and a unique partnership began.

Over the next three decades, the Village grew steadily with retirees from neighboring states and Midwestern cities like Chicago and Detroit. Between 1979 and 2004, nine golf courses were built at scattered locations among the community's meadows and woodlands, each with its own clubhouse and restaurant. (See "Golf in the Village.") The 11 on-site recreational lakes covering more than 2,000 acres and nearly 30 miles of internal nature trails proved to be equally popular recreational amenities. And, serious anglers and hikers soon discovered a paradise right next door in the pristine 1.8 million-acre Ouachita National Forest and its huge centerpiece lake with waters among the cleanest in America.

Additional facilities were built as the Village prospered: the 654-seat Woodlands Auditorium performing-arts venue, an anchor of an activity center that includes the new Grove Park Amphitheater and Casa de Carta, home to one of the nation's largest bridge clubs; The Coronado Community Center with its own 300-seat auditorium, a lending library, and meeting space for what would become more than 100 community clubs and organizations; a fitness center with indoor pool and workout facilities; a tennis center with additional pickleball and bocce ball courts; two full-service marinas; and 25 churches serving 15 denominations. Residents also participate in dozens of volunteer organizations with an outreach well beyond the community gates.

Village infrastructure grew with its population. There are 501 miles of roads maintained by the HSV public works department, which also operates the recently expanded freshwater plant at a 12th community lake reserved for drinking water, plus two wastewater-treatment facilities. The Village also has its own police and fire departments located in four community substations, contracts for ambulance services with on-site paramedics, handles its own permitting and inspections, and even runs an on-site animal shelter. For all of these amenities and services, the annual assessment set by a vote of the Hot Springs Village property owners is currently around \$780.

Today, there are more than 31,000 HSV property owners, about 14,000 of whom live in the Village year-round in 9,000 mostly single-family homes. It's large enough to qualify as its own Census Enumerated District and could be an incorporated municipality, but it's not. Hot Springs Village is a different kind of democracy. Over the years, the working relationship between the original CCI developers and the HSV Property Owners Association evolved, with the latter taking on more and more responsibility. And, in recent years, CCI has turned over all operational control and ownership of most of the common areas and facilities to the POA—meaning that the property owners are in charge at Hot Springs Village, a huge benefit and responsibility in equal measure.



MOVING FORWARD

On April 20, 2020, Hot Springs Village will celebrate its 50th year in business and is already at work planning the festivities. For many communities, giving itself a big pat on the back for a half-century of growth and success would be sufficient. But, the seven-member HSVPOA Board of Directors, elected by the property owners to three-year staggered terms, had a different idea: Let's take stock of where we are, preserve and enhance what we like, make changes where necessary, and get started on a new direction for the Village before we throw ourselves a big 50th birthday party.

"While our plan includes many beautiful physical elements, our people are the real story. The unsung heroes in its creation and implementation are our 500+ employees, thousands of volunteers, business owners, and residents who will work hand-in-hand to bring this plan to life."

- Hot Springs Village POA Chief Executive Officer Lesley Nalley

Thus began a community-wide engagement with the property owners resulting in the 2018 Hot Springs Village Comprehensive Master Plan. During a year-long process that included outside consultants like DPZ and Crafton Tull, a 22-member volunteer POA committee and the Village planning staff, three surveys were sent out, and community meetings were organized to get as much input as possible. More than 4,000 completed surveys were returned, and hundreds turned out for a series of workshops, supplemented by personal conversations, phone calls, and emails to directors, committee members, and staffers.

Being America's premier active lifestyle community is who we are, and our Comprehensive Master Plan is focused on preserving that value for our property owners for years to come. - Board of Directors Chairman Tom Weiss of the Hot Springs Village Property Owners Association

The final Comprehensive Master Plan sets three major priorities consistent with an overwhelming consensus of Village property owners:

- Protect long-term financial sustainability,
- Enhance the community's natural character, and
- Offer new housing options for retirees and working families.

Because POA members set their own annual assessments to pay for Village operations, they have a vested interest in keeping costs down and generating new revenue. One option to achieve the latter—supported by 80% of survey respondents—is to establish an enhanced Town Center in the existing Woodlands Auditorium area. There is relatively little commercial development within the Village gates, but the central location of the Woodlands Town Center makes it an ideal place for a grocery store, specialty shops, professional-service offices, restaurants, and even a hotel. Lease revenue from those businesses could make a significant contribution to the Village balance sheet, as would sales or rental income from more urban-style townhomes, condominiums, or apartments for retirees looking to downsize, as well as younger workers.

But, the plan doesn't call for putting those eggs in a single basket: areas around the Coronado Center and Carmona Center could be similarly developed, albeit on a smaller scale, with clustered housing, neighborhood mar-

kets, cafés, and shops. All three areas would be walkable by design and connected by extended leisure paths, with choice areas reserved for parks and open space.

The Comprehensive Master Plan also focuses on future residential development in Hot Springs Village, with an eye toward both preserving existing property values and attracting new residents. Areas near the three primary activity centers already substantially developed should be prioritized for home site sales, while new pocket neighborhoods with smaller homes should be encouraged, thereby enhancing future housing options for new buyers. At the same time, some platted lots could be combined to create larger home sites, while others could be taken off the market to create pocket parks in keeping with the established natural character of the Village. Perhaps most remarkably, the plan advocates suspending sales of more than 5,000 lots (about 17% of the total) not only in perimeter areas with little existing development but also in large areas of partially-built neighborhoods, especially those lots in existing drainageways or on steep topography. This proposal would reduce the current oversupply of properties, while significantly expanding dedicated natural areas.

Among the other property owners' desires reflected in the plan are the establishment of a consolidated medical complex within the Village with corresponding shuttle service and expansion of the Lifelong Learning Institute programs. New marketing initiatives are also recommended and one is already in place: the new website at *ExploreTheVillage.com* includes overviews of community real estate and amenities, information about new Discovery Tour packages, and a link to the 2018 HSV Comprehensive Master Plan.

Maybe life really does begin at 50. The folks at Hot Springs Village certainly think so.





Golf in the Village

Hot Springs Village was designed from the start to be both a retirement community and a golf destination. The plan was that residents and visitors could share the cost of creating an unrivaled family of Arkansas championship courses. It worked.

Legend has it that Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto traversed the area in 1541, so the first Village golf course to open in 1972 was named for him. A theme was thus established and the Cortez (1979), Coronado (1982), Balboa (1987), Ponce de Leon (1991), Magellan (1996), Isabella (2000), and Granada (2004) followed. All eight golf courses are 18-hole layouts, except the 27-hole Isabella with her Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria nines. All were designed by the acclaimed architects at Ault, Clark & Associates. Each was built on a distinctive tract of pristine land, some featuring multiple lakefront holes, others offering sweeping views of the Ouachita Mountains. Many have been ranked among the state's best courses by leading golf publications and have hosted numerous tournament events. All have been consistently refurbished over the years and are maintained to the highest playability and environmental-impact standards.

The ninth HSV course—Diamante—opened in 1995 as a private country club. It's separately owned by its members, managed by Kemper Golf, and has been ranked among Arkansas' top private courses since its debut.

The other eight Village courses are owned and operated by the HSV Property Owners Association. Direc-

tor of Golf Tom Heffer, Director of Agronomy Gary Myers, and their staffs manage day-to-day operations, while a standing committee makes policy and budget recommendations. Visiting players from around the region and nearby Hot Springs vacation destinations pay an average greens fee of \$65, which is quite reasonable for a top-flight resort course and contributes to the Village's golf bottom line.

So much so, in fact, that Hot Springs Village property owners enjoy unlimited play on all eight courses for a single annual fee of just \$2,190. (That's not a misprint: \$2,190!) It's hard to imagine a better value in American golf and unsurprising that HSV residents take full advantage; they account for about 85% of the 243,000 annual rounds played, and up to a thousand are weekly tournament participants in the seven Village golf associations for men, women, couples, and juniors.

The daily fees paid by visiting golfers and the residents' annual contributions combine to substantially fund operation of the Village courses. As a result, the 2018 HSV Comprehensive Master Plan recommends no changes to the current program. However, new resident golfers attracted by contemporary housing options, plus increased visitor play with on-site accommodations like a Woodlands Town Center hotel, could actually make golf a community profit center in the future. And, POA members will still own their eight Hot Springs Village golf courses—which makes that \$2,190 a year an even sweeter deal. 