



**Village of Estero's Crown Jewel.** Coconut Point offers a variety of waterside dining and entertainment options for residents and visitors.

## It Takes a Village

Village of Estero demonstrates how to plan, run and grow a community.

By Niki Stojnic

SOMETIME IN 2008, the Federal Aviation Administration changed the flight paths of airplanes arriving to the Southwest Florida International Airport from northeastern U.S. The Village of Estero, a Gulf Coast town, was under the new paths, and consequently experiencing noise disruption. “All of a sudden we were getting all these planes overhead,” says Don Eslick, a former chairman and founding member of the Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL).

Residents organized to fight the problem, much like many a neighborhood or town might do. Unlike other communities, however, Estero residents who formed the “airport noise committee” knew a little bit about flying and airports: The group included three retired commercial airline pilots, a woman who ran the

Newark, New Jersey, airport and a retired air traffic controller. As you might expect with an expert team like that, they were successful in getting noise levels reduced.

That the community was able to draw on such expertise is a testament to the town’s magnetism as a place to live. Its charm starts with its natural assets: The Estero River flows through the town west into Estero Bay, and, says Eslick, “It’s strategically located between Naples and Fort Myers; everyone likes to be as close to the coast as possible.” But what makes it truly unique are the community-minded residents who guide the town’s growth. The result is an example of city planning done intentionally and well.

“I moved [to Estero] because of what I thought was an ideal location and weather. After 15 years, I find that I am so

very fortunate to live in a piece of paradise that is so much more than location and weather,” says Estero Mayor Nick Batos.

The community was incorporated as Village of Estero on December 31, 2014. Eslick says that a substantial number of its residents are professionals and retired executives who want to do something meaningful, so they put their significant talents to use volunteering in various capacities. “Among all the communities in southwest Florida, we’re the only one that has sustaining community organizations.”

Among those volunteers is Tim Bristow, senior vice president and sales representative in Colliers International’s Toronto office. Initially, Bristow found himself looking for a good real estate investment after the U.S. housing bubble burst in 2007. He bought a home in Estero with the intention

PHOTOS BY JANE AND JOE MORAN

to eventually turn it around to sell. That didn't happen. He and his family fell in love with Estero, and now Bristow lends his time to the community as a part-time resident. "My wife says we're never selling it," he says with a laugh.

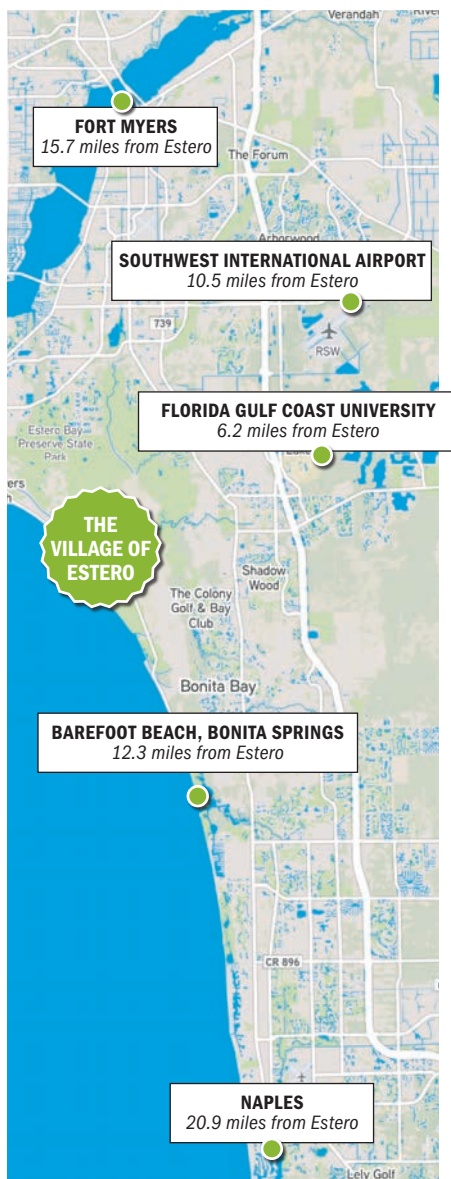
Estero's development into a volunteer-planned community came about as surrounding areas experienced a boom in development. As those areas filled up, people began to look toward Estero's undeveloped land, which offered easy access to an international airport as well as a university, among its many attractions. Housing development brought commercial properties. Eslick, who arrived in 1999, and a couple of like-minded residents led the formation of ECCL, as well as the Estero Community Planning Panel and Estero Design Review Committee—which created architectural and landscaping guidelines so that new development would keep the character of Estero consistent.

The ECCL oversaw the addition of 14,000 homes and appealing commercial developments, including its crown jewel: Coconut Point Mall. An outdoor complex of shops, restaurants and condominiums, it also plays host to live music events and festivals.

Three years ago, Estero landed a major corporate resident: Hertz. The company opened a new, three-story, 250,000-square-foot global headquarters last fall, bringing more than 700 jobs to the area. The company just put 8–10 acres of the land it didn't use on the market for the next interested buyer. In addition, in early 2015, Colliers International Southwest Florida brokered the sale of 43 acres of land to the developer Stock Development.

"Estero hits every criteria for businesses seeking a headquarters or regional office location: a welcoming business environment with great housing options, quality schools (including one of America's fastest-growing universities), a diverse workforce, fantastic recreational amenities and no state income tax," notes Jim Tamblyn, senior associate with Colliers International's Southwest Florida office.

Estero has continued to evolve to ad-



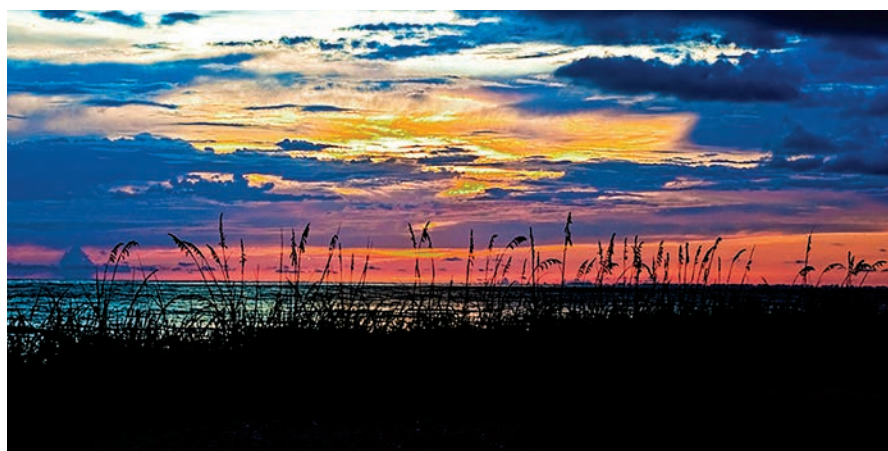
dress the needs of old and new residents alike. Today, older residents want smaller homes and more walkable amenities. And students are flocking to Florida Gulf Coast University, located about a mile north of Estero.

"There's a clear need for multiuse housing projects, affordable rental housing and single-family housing," says Bristow. "That will bring more jobs, more companies."

On that front, Estero is firing on all cylinders: Eslick says about 1,000 units of senior housing are being added in the area, while the past two to three years have seen four major rental projects get underway. The local Lee Memorial Hospital is developing a state-of-the-art outpatient system on 31 acres, which will include a 24/7 emergency room. The project is slated to be finished in mid-2018. That means more jobs for the town, which ranks among the top 20 cities in Florida to find a job, according to a 2016 WalletHub survey.

Among the many things that make Estero an ideal place for businesses to locate, Batos points to highly qualified potential employees, including university students, as well as the lack of state or city income tax. "Estero has, for over 15 years, established a high standard of development that has resulted in a community that has attracted the most discriminating residents and businesses.

"It is filled with people who are willing to give of themselves for the community," says Batos, "and a place that is truly a village with a vision." **KL**



**A Piece of Paradise.** Sunset at Lovers Key on the Gulf of Mexico