On December 27, 2010, Martin County residents were taking advantage of Christmas sales and returning unwanted gifts to the local mall when a wildfire sprang up in the distance, visible to the residents at the mall. The fire, known as the Hobe Sound Wildfire, was eventually put out by emergency crews, but wildfires would continue to terrorize the community in Martin County throughout 2011.

The Florida Forest Service and Martin County Fire and Rescue continued to be vigilant and proactive in protecting their community by emphasizing principles to create a fire resilient community, but there were a few barriers they had to overcome. The problem for the residents, however, was long established regulations that protected wildlife preserves throughout the county. The regulations were part of a program that began in 1982 which protected wetlands and, later, native upland habitats within developed areas, including residential subdivisions. Certainly, these preserves warranted a certain level of protection from development, as these natural spaces provide many aesthetic and environmental benefits to the citizens of the area.

“We have a beautiful, very natural atmosphere here,” said Doug Killane, Bureau Chief of Martin County Fire and Rescue, “and communities want to be a part of that.”

But what is the trade-off for the community? The reality is that structures are under a constant threat of a wildfire if preserves are not managed properly. Preserves particularly pose a serious threat to residential subdivisions where they come within a few hundred feet of homes, as underbrush and vegetation run rampant, providing potential fuel to any fire.

Wildfires are also not unique to Martin County. In 2015, the USDA Forest Service spent 52 percent of their budget fighting wildfires throughout the country. Just in the southeastern U.S., 1 million acres are burned each year, a result of nearly 45,000 wildfires.
Martin County was just another victim of a far too common problem where local ordinances do not consider principles that will protect communities from wildfire. The Cohesive Strategy for the southeastern region of the United States aligned with the goals of Martin County. The southeastern region identified three important goals for the southern states: restore and maintain landscapes across the region, ensure communities are built to withstand wildfires without loss of life or property, and create a strategy for effective wildfire response and management. These three goals provided the framework for collaboration between all members, from the public to local and state officials, in effectively combating wildfires by building fire resilient communities.

Fire resilient communities throughout the southeastern region, of course, could not thrive without effective collaboration between the populace, which increased 14.3 percent between 2000 and 2010 and had six of the 10 fastest-growing counties in the country, and the agencies and organizations that oversee fire safety throughout the southeast. Cooperation between these different private and public stakeholders allows communities, like Martin County, to plan for the future by encouraging tactics that protect residential areas, like prescribed burning, which is more common in the southeast than in other regions because of the rapid vegetation regrowth rate throughout the area.

“You just can’t always do it by yourself because it’s just not always in your venue,” Killane said. “But if you can find the right people, you can certainly put it together.”

Through community involvement and discussion, launched by escalating homeowner complaints, the Martin County Fire and Rescue and the Florida Forest Service partnered with Martin County’s Growth Management Department to create the Wildfire Mitigation Task Force with personnel from all three agencies. The Wildfire Mitigation Task Force toured areas where structures were threatened by overgrown vegetation, discussed potential solutions through meetings with homeowners in the community, and conducted home assessments to identify structures vulnerable to vegetation encroachment.

“We looked at what can we do right away to help these communities,” said Shawn McCarthy, Principle Planner for Martin County Growth Management. “We realized we needed to rewrite county code that would allow more fire protection.”

By looking at the assessments of the Wildfire Mitigation Task Force, the Growth Management Department drafted a proposal to present to the Board of County Commissioners. The proposal was adopted on June 11, 2013, as Ordinance 930, which amended Article 4, Division 2 of the Martin County Land Development Regulations.

The ordinance provided defensible space for new developments and gave existing communities the ability to amend their Preserve Area Management Plans (PAMP). The most important amendment was the

“There are 54 homes that butt-up against the preserve, and that got us concerned about any fire that started.” – Rick Deluga, Resident of The Arbors

Rick Deluga moved to The Arbors community just two year’s after the community’s establishment 25 years ago. As a retiree, he serves as a volunteer, and has been critical to building consensus with residents.

FLORIDA SUCCESS STORY

LOCATION
Martin County, Florida

STRATEGY
To create a Wildfire Mitigation Task Force to amend The Arbors community’s Preserve Area Management Plan (PAMP)

PARTNERS
Martin County Growth Management
Martin County Fire and Rescue
Florida Forest Service
Arbors Community Homeowners
ability to hand clear dead vegetation in the preserves deemed a wildfire risk by the Florida Forest Service or Martin County Fire and Rescue.

One community, The Arbors, served as a shining example of these new policies in Martin County. The community consisted of 190 upscale homes built in the ‘90s along lakes and preserves. The preserves protected indigenous hardwoods and pines along with native flora and fauna. The residents rejected any plan that would destroy this ecosystem that housed endangered scrub jays and gopher tortoises, but they recognized the danger of vegetation that touched a dozen homes with no access for firefighters if an incident occurred.

“The fire that got us going was back in 2011,” said Rick Deluga, a resident of The Arbors. “There are 54 homes that butt-up against the preserve, and that got us concerned about any fire that started.”

In search of a solution for their community, The Arbors hired a consultant to rewrite their PAMP. The solution for The Arbors, known as The Arbors Community Fuel Management Plan, was voted in by the community on March 1, 2016. The votes were unanimously in favor of the plan.

“We had a lot of meetings with Growth Management in what we needed to do to work with them,” Deluga said. “And working through the PAMP, which was kind of restrictive at the time, but they’ve worked with us to make it a little more workable for us residents.”

Beginning in April 2016, the fuel reduction project was initiated in three parts. The first phase allowed the Florida Forest Service Region Four Wildfire Mitigation Team to mow the overgrown vegetation behind homes, providing a defensible corridor and access for Martin County Fire and Rescue in the event of a fire. Four acres were mowed, protecting 67 homes at a cost of $14,298.69.

The second phase consisted of disking seven-foot-wide firebreaks through the preserve. The disk line in the preserve around The Arbors ran two miles long. The intention was to set up the preserve for the third phase, a prescribed burn to remove unwanted vegetation that posed a threat if a wildfire occurred. Phases two and three not only provided preventative protection for The Arbors, but also set the community up for future action as a clear plan allows all parties to act appropriately.

When asked about what the rest of Martin County could do in the future, Shawn McCarthy stressed the importance of further developing and pushing the plans that have been put into place while continuing to spread Firewise USA® principles across the county.

“The next step, as part of this whole process, is to improve what we do internally and how we implement the code that we wrote,” McCarthy said. “We ask that homeowners’ associations set up their own meetings and educate their own community members on why this is important.”

Moving forward, residents of Martin County can look back on the wildfires from 2009 through 2011 as a turning point for their community in the fight for adequate protection in the event of such a disaster. Luckily, success at The Arbor will serve as an example for future communities in both Martin County and throughout the southeast as those communities look to replicate the process launched by The Arbor, reduce homeowners’ frustrations, and provide better communication between responders and residents.