

BUSINESS & REAL ESTATE

WEEK OF APRIL 7-13, 2011

A GUIDE TO THE NAPLES BUSINESS & REAL ESTATE INDUSTRIES



Just stopped off at your condo and everything is ...

Keeping up with snowbirds' homes proves lucrative for some

BY BILL CORNWELL

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"HEY, WILL YOU KEEP AN EYE ON THE PLACE while we're gone?"

Those were the words that many seasonal residents used to utter as they prepared to move back north after spending the winter in Southwest Florida. For years, the time-honored tradition was that fulltime residents would occasionally check on the homes of their seasonal neighbors. And the results often were disastrous. The neighbors might have been well-meaning, but they were busy and checks were random and infrequent.

Moreover, many did not know what to look for or what to do if they encountered a problem.

As a result, the business of professional home watchers has become a flourishing enterprise in the area.

"Many a friendship has been ruined by something happening to a house while the owner is away," says Bob Myers of Home Watch Group of SWFL, which is based in Fort Myers and oversees some 215 homes in Collier, Charlotte and Lee counties.

"If you've got a friend or neighbor watching the home and something isn't caught in

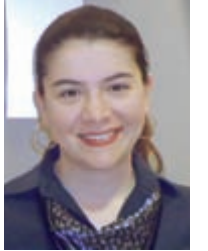
SEE WATCHING, B7 ►



COURTESY PHOTO

Diane Westphal of Your Home Watch Professionals

INSIDE



On the Move

See who's going where, doing what on the local business scene. **B4** ►



Ask the Fool

Besides Standard & Poor's, what are the major stock indexes? **B6** ►



Real estate

Clubhouse, model homes nearing completion in Manchester Square. **B11** ►

SCORE workshop examines the export market

What's hot and what's not in the export market is the topic of a workshop presented by SCORE Naples and co-sponsored by The Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce, the Southwest Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Council of Collier County and Enterprise Florida from 9 a.m. to noon Thursday, April 14, at the chamber of commerce, 2390 Tamiami Trail N.

Presenters Manny Mencia and Joe Kulenovic, both with Enterprise Florida, will discuss export opportunities in key

worldwide markets, the world's economic trends and their impact on Florida, market entry strategies and best practices for those already in the business.

Registration is \$25. Sign up online at www.scorenaples.org or by calling the SCORE office at 439-0081 weekdays between 9 a.m. and noon.

SCORE Naples has more than 60 volunteer counselors who are retired executives or former business owners. The chapter participates in more than 2,000 business counseling sessions a year. ■

Miromar Outlets hosts program for job hunters

Miromar Outlets and Dress for Success-Southwest Florida will present a free workshop from 5-8 p.m. Wednesday, April 13, featuring experts with advice about appropriate attire for a job interview, resume building and interview techniques as well as information about who is hiring in the area. Refreshments and raffle prizes will be part of the event.

"This event is intended for graduating college students, our neighbors who are out of work or anyone looking to

make a career change," says Jeff Staner, vice president of Miromar Outlets. "We recognize the importance of making the most of every opportunity in today's competitive job market."

The mission of Dress for Success is to promote the economic independence of women by providing professional attire, career development tools and a network of support to help them thrive at work and in life. For more information, visit www.dressforsuccess.org/swflorida or www.MiromarOutlets.com. ■

WATCHING

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a timely manner, it certainly can create ill feelings with a friend or neighbor," agrees Steve Braveman who, along with Paul Patro and their wives, runs BeaSafe Home Watch Service in Estero.

But selecting a reputable service is not always easy, says Diane Westphal, who founded Your Home Watch Professionals in Naples in 2005.

"Think about this: You are turning the keys to your home over to someone," she says. "That is a responsibility that should never be taken lightly."

Complicating the selection process is that there are no specific licensing requirements in Florida for home watching. But, of course, the home watcher should hold some sort of business license.

"Whoever you select absolutely should be a licensed business that is insured and bonded," says Ms. Westphal, who is actively leading a drive to impose stricter standards on the industry. Ms. Westphal conducts seminars called "Who Has My Keys" to inform the public and real estate professionals about what to demand from a home watcher.

Simply using Google or a telephone directory is a dangerous way to select a watcher, she says. Ask around among friends and neighbors, and real estate professionals are another good source when it comes to finding an honest and dependable watch service.

Most home watchers charge by the visit. Charges can vary from around \$40 a visit to nearly \$70, depending on the size of the property and whether it is a condo or a detached home.

Ms. Westphal says if a service offers a rock-bottom rate — let's say \$15 a visit — it could be a tipoff that it is neither insured nor bonded.

"We don't do monthly visits," says Mr. Myers, whose firm checks either weekly or twice a month. "So much can go wrong in a month, and if you wait that long to uncover it, it can be an absolute disaster."



COURTESY PHOTO

Steve Braveman and Paul Patro of BeaSafe Home Watch Service in Estero

Mr. Braveman concurs, and his service offers only bi-weekly or weekly options.

Ms. Westphal says the frequency of inspection is crucial. Her firm offers options of seven, 10 or 14 days, and she has horror stories of what can happen when the time between checks is any longer.

She knows of one instance in Naples where a home owner did not employ a service. There was a minor air conditioning malfunction, which if addressed early could have been repaired at minimal expense. But no one noted the problem, and this relatively insignificant problem led to extreme humidity within the home, which, in turn, resulted in a severe mold problem that developed over a few days. The final cost to the homeowner exceeded \$30,000.

"Checking once a month is simply not going to do the job," says Mr. Myers. "Mold and mildew alone can become a major disaster in much less time than that."

Ms. Westphal says her service detects problems in approximately 30 percent of the residences it watches. Because most of these problems are found early, serious (and costly) repairs are rare, she says.

The idea that reputable home watchers merely walk through a residence and look for obvious problems is simply not true, says Mr. Braveman.

His business, like Ms. Westphal's and Mr. Myers', operates from a detailed checklist of potential problems and hazards.

They do, of course, look for things like signs of break-in or vandalism, but that is the tip of the iceberg. They also check to make sure that services such as pool maintenance and landscaping are being done according to plan.

Other areas that draw attention are possible water leaks, plumbing problems, signs of mold and mildew and even ancillary services such as checking on and starting any motor vehicles that



COURTESY PHOTO

A broken air conditioner can quickly lead to serious mold problems.

left behind.

"There are problems specific to owning a home in Florida that are unique to this area," says Mr. Braveman. "Because of the weather — the heat and humidity — it is quite different from owning a home up north, and not everyone realizes this."

After every inspection, Mr. Braveman, Mr. Myers and Ms. Westphal say they inform the homeowner of what they have found — usually by e-mail.

"We let them know even if we have found nothing unusual," says Ms. Westphal.

"Part of what we are offering is peace of mind," says Mr. Braveman. "We don't communicate with our clients only when

there is a problem."

Using a reliable watch service also can result in insurance benefits. In some instances it might lower the rate, and it usually helps to validate claims if a problem takes place.

Apart from the more sophisticated aspects of home watching, there are other more elemental reasons for having someone look after a home.

"Quite often we find that the owners have the lights on or left the front door unlocked and the security system off," says Mr. Myers. "It's not that unusual, and it's something we all can identify with. Who hasn't gone on a trip and then suddenly thought, 'Did I turn the oven off?'" ■

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