

The Beachcomber, Destin, Florida

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Editor's Journal

You know how it is when you're chatting with a friend. Often outrageous world-changing ideas are proposed or ideas floated to improve communities or the quality of life for some of our neighbors.

So it was that I found myself talking with Denise Dorman, an Illinois transplant who is WriteBrain Media, a public relations think tank of one. I first met Denise about a year ago at a meeting of the Emerald Coast Advertising Federation. I liked her immediately. Perhaps it was the common bond of two no-nonsense, direct, smart midwestern women finding themselves floundering in Southern culture, or it was simply the open kindness I found in her face. Whatever the reason, we hit it off and I talk to her from time to time.

Last week I was telling her about how you can tell springtime is just around the corner in Destin (she lives in Shalimar) because virtually everyone has a sign out needing employees, and isn't it strange to live in a place with more places to work than there are people to work there. I told her I had two or three email inquiries in January from students in Russia and Poland seeking summer work. None of the inquiries probably had any idea they were sending their resumes to a newspaper, but each asked about assistance in finding a place to live.

The lack of affordable housing in this area has been much in the local news lately. The problem isn't getting better for full time residents, but it is truly horrendous for those who plan to be here only temporarily. Last year there were multiple newspaper stories about European students living in makeshift dwellings, and often holding down two or three jobs. Others were camping in places where there is no camping because they could not afford to rent a place to live.

Most of the students come to the U.S. for summer work to try and earn enough money for more schooling in their own country and a variety of agencies help them with the necessary visas and so forth. Apparently, no one is helping with the housing problems faced by these young working visitors once they arrive. Finding a place to live is difficult and then many are handicapped further by the lack of public transportation.

As Denise and I talked, I said it would seem like a no-brainer for a consortium of retail shop owners, restaurant owners and condo owners to band together to provide housing for summer workers in Destin, where the county runs a trolley. According to statistics I gathered from the Okaloosa County TDC, there is never 100 percent occupancy of all available short-term rental units now, and they are still building more. Less desirable units, which are probably the ones not being rented, could be leased by the consortium for the use of short-term workers. Given the size of some of the units, four to six people could live comfortably and the workers could be charged a normal rent, rather than a tourist rate. Some smart tax lawyer could probably find a way for the consortium to write off some of the costs associated with this. This would solve the problem of no place to live and the difficulty in getting to work for the summer students.

After Denise and I agreed the idea was probably far too sensible to be adopted, we hung up. The thoughts were still banging around in my head when I opened my email to find a press release from Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort about the opening of a housing complex, large enough for 460 workers, right on the Sandestin property. What a revolutionary and forward thinking idea! Provide a decent place to live for hard working

employees and one which will not force them to worry about transportation, as they will be right on the property. Sandestin is calling it the Village of Mauritius and people started moving in last weekend.

This is just the kind of thing that so rarely happens anywhere. A need is recognized and a need is met. My hat is off to the management team at Sandestin for finding a way to meet their need for employees and recognizing that unskilled and lower paid workers simply will not work at their lovely resort if they can't find a decent place to live that they can afford. Hopefully, other local business owners will take note.