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Horse Country

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Community Background Report

Horse Country

County

Miami-Dade

Boundaries

North: S.W. 40th Street

South: S.W. 88th Street

West: S.W. 127th Avenue

East: Florida Turnpike (SR 821 HY)

Community Type

Neighborhood

History

“Welcome to Horse Country”, reads the rustic wooden sign greeting visitors who turn south from Bird Road and southwest 122nd Street. The 2,000 acres of farmland are bounded north, south, east and west by Bird Road, Kendall Drive, Florida's Turnpike Extension and Southwest 127th Avenue respectively. There used to be another sign at the Bird Road entrance: “Drive carefully and slowly,” it said, “because if you hurt an animal, you may not leave Horse Country” (Baboon 2006). Now the speed limit on many streets is 45 mph and 30 in the residential areas, and the “drive carefully” signs have been taken down (Herschtal 2005). “The people here are the farmer type”, said Hagen a 10 year Horse Country resident, “It's a very laid back type of community” (Herschtal 2005). But even Hagen admits that the town's open roads can be seductive. When he first put his bought his car in 2001, a resident followed him home, then reprimanded him for speeding as he got out of his car.

On a zoning map of Dade County, Horse Country still looks like the agricultural oasis it once was: home to farmers and their crops and ranchers and their horses. Horse Country, encompasses a 2 1/2- square-mile area from Florida's Turnpike to Southwest 127th Avenue and from Bird Road to Kendall Drive (Faiola 1990). Horse Country is considered by many to be a one of a kind neighborhood in West Kendall with horses, livestock and plant nurseries. Horse Country is the last neighborhood in Miami-Dade County where equestrian competitions are held.

Horse Country's first development challenge came in 1975. The owner of a lot on southwest 43rd street and 127th Avenue requested a variance to put in a strip shopping center. He convinced his neighbor to agree to sell also if the variance was granted. Marian Bonsignore a neighborhood resident recognized what a serious threat this zoning change would be to Horse Country. The neighborhood resident that joined in that protest became the charter members of the Horse Country Association and the Homeowners association. In the beginning Marian "did it all" says the Horse Country Association: "she went door to door to recruit new members and to collect dues; she notified everyone when there was a hearing and led groups downtown", "when Marian moved out of the area she recruited Barbara Musgrove her replacement to take over. Barbara like Marian "did it all" (HorseCountry.org).

"The whole area has been raped," said Viviane Baboon, a 10 year Horse Country resident. "You can't even ride horses out here anymore. It's not safe. Cars speed down the streets and frighten the horses. We have to take them to the parks to find safe bridle paths," said Mr. Hill, who owns the Taurus restaurant in Coconut Grove with her husband, David. Horse Country residents, however, say they have always ridden their horses down Sunset Drive, then south on SW 117th Avenue to horse trails in the Kendall Home Property at SW 79th Street and SW 117th Avenue.

Yet the core of Horse Country, though tainted by traffic, has retained much of its rural flavor. Many residents say their neighborhood will continue to prevail over extensive development. "Horse Country is still thriving," said Linda Varner, former president of the Bird Kendall Homeowners Association. The name of the association indicates the broad definition of Horse Country from Bird Road to Kendall Drive. "In the long run, I think Horse Country will be protected," said Ray Villar, Metro-Dade County's zoning control division chief. One of the homeowners association's biggest battles against development has been with Eduardo Martinez and his Hacienda Mardenpaz. Martinez wanted to have a gigantic public Fourth of July party this year, until neighbors complained. Metro stepped in and stopped it because Martinez didn't have a party permit. The association does not want Martinez throwing public parties on his ranch. They say it will create the first major commercial intrusion into the heart of Horse Country. "His intentions are really to create a Signature Gardens type of commercial use," said Ron Weeks, president of the Bird Kendall Homeowners Association. Signature Gardens is a Kendall banquet hall. "We have fought these things and we don't want to see him establish it. Zoning attorneys can then use it as a back door to allow more commercial uses." Martinez says he wasn't trying to create a commercial intrusion.

"But some of the horse business is leaving" said horse trainer Kathy Wood. She opened her Royal Palm Farms in the Redland after working for two years in Horse Country. She said Horse Country is not as hospitable to horses as it once was because traffic and development have closed in. She said many people who boarded horses in Horse Country are moving them to the still isolated Redland. "Compared to the Redland, Horse Country is suburbia," Wood said. "It's completely different out here. We still have trails where people can ride safely. There's no place left in Horse Country where I'd put an expensive horse." Chris Hill, who boards horses at her stables, disagrees. She said the terrain in the Redland is too rocky to keep horses and too many farmers spray pesticides that could be a health hazard to horses (Mesa 1991).

Unknown to many people are the burrowing owls that call the area home. The burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*) is found in many places throughout North and South America. Sherry Gillis, who operates a boarding barn in Horse Country, has several burrowing owls enjoying residence on her property. Gillis said that for 42 years that she knows of, burrowing owls have always been on or around the property. “I’m sure there are lots of them out there that people don’t even know about,” she said. Gillis believes many of the developers that have most recently tried to move into the little agricultural area of Miami-Dade have had no knowledge of the protected animals, or just have not cared. “Horse Country is a very unique place, and they’re shrinking the neighborhood.” It’s a neighborhood Dr. Kraus called “ideal” for burrowing owl habitation. The owls can be found throughout the county (HorseCountry.org). The burrowing owl is endangered in Canada, threatened in Mexico, and a species of special concern in most of the western USA. The major reasons for declining populations are control programs for prairie dogs and loss of habitat. But, Horse Country is one of the only residential areas where the birds can be commonly found. Today, Horse Country is searching to strengthen its identity (König, Weick & Becking 1999).

There are many breeds of horses in Horse Country, but Arabians are most common. Rohara Arabian farms, recently transplanted to Ocala, bred the world champion Tsultress. Other breeds in Horse Country are Pasa fino, thoroughbred, Tennessee walking horse, Morgan, Clydesdale, quarter horse, Lipizzaner, Andalusian, American Saddle Bred, palomino, appaloosa, Shetland pony, Welsh pony, Belgian draft horse and miniature horses (Baboon 2006).

Another dilemma the neighborhood is encountering is the garbage collection. “Piles of rotted garbage, soggy magazines, rusted cans, an abandoned 25-inch Mitsubishi color television and an uninhabitable trailer” can be seen around the neighborhood (Rabin 2005). Ever since a noise barrier wall was built on the west side of Florida’s Turnpike along Southwest 118th Avenue about five years ago, that’s exactly what’s been gathering along Horse Country’s most eastern border in Southwest Miami-Dade. If someone admits to dumping trash they are usually cited on the spot. Fines range from \$250 to \$1,000. If a dumping is particularly egregious or the owner does not work with police, an arrest can be made for violating Florida’s litter law, which can carry up to a \$5,000 fine. If police don’t find owners, the County’s Authority remove the trash (Rabin 2005).

The landmarks of the neighborhoods are the Matthews Nursery, Neighborhood Fish Farm, Liz Langford Arabian Stables, Circle-C Youth Ranch, Miami’s International Horse Park, 12 wildlife preserves and a wildlife sanctuary for injured animals (Miami Herald 1985). The neighborhood’s festivals are the Annual country barbecue picnic scheduled for March and the Horse Country Independence Party and Fourth of July Parade.

Community Dynamics

As of the census of 2000, there were 900 people, 230 households, and 145 families residing in Horse Country. The racial distribution of the Horse Country was 97.01% White, 0.63% African

American, 0.43% Native American, 0.41% Asian, 0.13% Pacific Islander, 1.01% from other races, and 3.36% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race was 39.76% of the population. There were 230 households out of which 37.6% had children under the age of 18 living with them, 37.1% were married couples living together, 31.4% had a female householder with no husband present, and 23.3% were non-families. 19.0% of all households were made up of individuals and 7.7% had someone living alone who was 65 years of age or older. ... The median income for a household in Horse Country was \$58,943, and the median income for a family was \$38,389. Males had a median income of \$53,052 versus \$32,933 for females. The per capita income for Horse Country was \$21,887. ... About 3.2% of families and 6.0% of the population were below the poverty line, including 22.4% of those under age 18 and 24.9% of that age 65 or over.

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