



## **What Homeowner Association Board Members in Orange County, Florida Think about Water Conservation and the Use of Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Principles**

LIZ FELTER<sup>1\*</sup>, TRACY A. IRANI<sup>2</sup>, AND MICHAEL DUKES<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Florida, IFAS, Mid Florida Research and Education Center, 2725 S. Binion Rd., Apopka, FL 32703*

<sup>2</sup>*Family, Youth, and Community Sciences Department, University of Florida, IFAS, Gainesville, FL 32611*

<sup>3</sup>*Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering, University of Florida, IFAS, Gainesville, FL 32611*

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A recent study was conducted to examine the perceptions of homeowner association (HOA) board members in Orange County, FL, about water conservation and the use of Florida-Friendly™ Landscaping (FFL) principles. Specifically, the study looked at how open the HOAs were to increasing water conservation among the residents and how likely they were to accept FFL designs. This study used qualitative research methods through the use of focus groups to determine whether the board members attitude was open to change when it came to increasing water conservation and incorporating FFL principles. A total of four focus groups were conducted, which included 42 participants, and represented 31 different homeowner associations. An emerging theme for barriers to increasing water conservation practices was the need to maintain property value by having a nice landscape and green grass. Another emerging theme was that as an HOA board, they did not have the skills to build consensus among the residents that had lived in the subdivisions for 30 years and the young 30-year-olds moving into the neighborhood. Some HOAs are allowing residents to have Bahia grass in the backyard and St. Augustine in the front yard. Felter et al. determined in 2014 that homeowners do not know how to properly care for these two varieties of turf. Allowing this practice will contribute to the confusion that already exists about lawn care. The use of FFL was supported, if it was well manicured and did not create a security hazard.

A study was conducted in 2014 to determine the perceptions of homeowner association (HOA) board members in Orange County, FL. The research project compared the responses of the HOA board members to the responses given by sub-division residents conducted in 2013. A gap between homeowners' perceptions and practices in caring for their yards, particularly their irrigation practices, and the reality of their potential contributions to the water shortages in Orange County, Florida, was noted. The study sought to establish what role the HOA played in promoting lawn care practices that contributed to wasteful watering. Residents of Orange County, FL, were chosen as a population of interest because Orange County is included within the Central Florida Coordination Area (CFCA), an area created by the Southwest Florida, South Florida and St. Johns River Water Management Districts. The CFCA action plan limits additional groundwater withdrawals to no more than that needed to meet year 2013 demands, as new water permit volumes will not go past those granted in 2013. Therefore, Orange County Utilities (2010) must focus on water conservation as the primary source of water for new residents.

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\*Corresponding author. Email: lfelter@ufl.edu; phone: 407-410-6961.

### **Materials and Methods**

Focus group methodology is used in qualitative research and was selected for this study. Focus group discussions create a process of sharing and comparing among the participants to provide the context and depth behind their thoughts and experiences (Morgan and Krueger, 1998). They also "provide insight into complicated topics where opinions or attitudes are conditional or where the area of concern relates to multifaceted behavior or motivation" (Krueger, 1994). Focus group methodology includes the use of special methods in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. The ideal focus group size is 5–10 people per session. Multiple groups are used to insure reliability and validity.

Four focus groups were conducted for this study. A research-marketing firm, using a state provided list of HOA board members, recruited the participants. A total of 42 people participated; represented 31 HOAs and 27 of those HOAs were represented in the previous study conducted in 2013. The members ranged in age from 35–75, they were culturally diverse, many professions were represented and two-thirds were male versus one-third female. Participants received a \$70 fee as a recruitment incentive at the conclusion of the focus group session. A skilled, objective moderator guided the sessions through a script of questions.

## Results and Discussion

The focus group sessions revealed that HOA board members had mixed feelings about water conservation. Here are a few quotes HOA president, Frank, “I tell everybody the same thing in our community. We have a community that has very strict laws, covenants, regarding maintenance of the yards. We are still building, they’re building another 165 homes in the back in addition to the 1152 already built. What they’ve done now is, they’re doing Augustine in the front and Bahia in the back. And by doing that, to help conserve.” Residents do not know how to take care of the different varieties of grass nor do they know how to operate irrigation clocks (Felter et al., 2015). Therefore, using two varieties of grass will not reduce water use. Another participant said “it’s all about property value, you have to keep the grass looking good.”

One emerging theme was illustrated by this participant. Amber said: “So, there is a very large gap in, I’m just going to call it generational outlooks between the residents that have lived here 30 years and the new residents that are 30 years old, none of this was discussed until the two of us who are younger than everybody else by a minimum of twenty-five years, this wasn’t discussed until we got on the board.”

Amber continued with, “And so we’re trying to bridge... I am here tonight, accepted this invitation because I’m trying to figure out how to bridge the . . . bridge and format a better understanding for our community of why this works and how your area can be beautiful even as I misspoke earlier, even without doing a xeri . . . xeriscape, that you can do like pockets. Like Angela, it sounds like you’ve done, you know, pockets in your yard of dif-

ferent flora and fauna that are native, that require less water, that reduce water bills that . . . that everybody could find acceptable to be aesthetically pleasing. So, that’s kind of where we are and the politics a little bit behind it all.”

Finally, when participants were shown picture boards of yards that had used Florida-Friendly Landscape™ principles it was clear that they preferred the photos of the yards that were well maintained but did not necessarily have a large amount of grass, had color and texture and was not going to pose a security challenge to the homeowner.

What can we learn from this information? Extension programming needs to target the home owners society boards and will need to segment the approach to include instruction in all the different areas as well as determine what approach may increase the change in behavior and not just increase the level of knowledge gained by program participants. Extension faculty could teach consensus building to help HOAs bridge the gap. If water conservation is to be successful the HOA’s needs to be at the table with the water management districts and support the need to save water.

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