

2026

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Letter from the President

As we ring in the new year, I want to reflect on our accomplishments and discuss the challenges we continue to face. I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved together and of the people who made it happen.

On behalf of The Cottages, I extend my sincere thanks to our Board members—**Steve Bragg, Tom Hickey, Jim May, and Bob Metelko**—as well as our board appointed Committee leaders, **Marylin May** for Communications, and **Joe Casale** for Architectural Review. They along with other dedicated volunteers, help to fulfill the Association's property and financial management responsibilities and save our community thousands of dollars in Association costs.

Other key volunteers include: **Carole Myles**, who assists me on landscaping oversight, fielding neighbors' questions and concerns, and representing The Cottages on the Big Rivendell Maintenance Committee; **Chris Smith**, who assists in irrigation emergencies, maintains our directory updates, and provides technology support for meetings and events; **Bob Dombrowski**, who is assisting with our annual oak and palm tree trimming; **Ken Alarie**, who represents the Cottages on Rivendell's Fining Committee; **Bert Andresen** who repairs fences and helps with other minor repairs; **Isobel Murray**, who chaired our annual members' meeting and helps monitor the pool condition; **Jackie Axiom**, who delivers directories and newsletters and completes pool checks along with **Diane McCourt**, who also looks after clubhouse maintenance; and last but not least, **Debbie Craddock**, who leads the Social Committee, and the Welcome Committee with **Jenny Volk**.

We made progress but faced unexpected challenges this past year, particularly in landscaping, which represents a significant portion of my work and the Association's expenses, and is considered a key benefit for both current and prospective homeowners. A fungus and pest outbreak struck our properties this summer which destroyed multiple lawns. Here is a summary of our actions over the last year:

- Negotiated the GreenTech (GT) annual grounds' contract increase so it tied to the national CPI index and, at their expense, received an independent turf study to help us address our turf health and landscape longevity after several years of decline. The report recommended changes including – use of alternative landscape designs and moving away from turf, use of environmentally, sustainable plants and turf varieties, a proactive treatment schedule for fungicide and pest treatments, and modifications to our irrigation system. Our landscape plans for 2026 will focus on those recommendations;

- ❑ Refreshed over a dozen homes with new plants and/or replacement trees last spring;
- ❑ Installed new turf or ground cover this fall on ten properties in response to a fungus outbreak, with more turf replacement planned in the months ahead. GT (at their expense) added grass seed to boulevards this fall to help it green up until spring;
- ❑ Assessed the stormwater swale along the south fence with an excavation expert, which led to clearing the area of sand, foliage (and statues) that impeded water flow, and requesting homeowners to address gutter-related drainage issues;
- ❑ Completed a major trim of large oak and palm trees and removed dead trees last spring from Hurricane Milton, improving both the safety and overall appearance on the circle. The next major trim is scheduled for early February 2026.

In addition to landscaping work, the clubhouse, pool and streetlights required ongoing maintenance support by volunteers. The following was completed or is still work in progress:

- ❑ Commissioned by the Board, a Clubhouse/Pool Task Force identified repairs/improvements needed over the next few years. Some minor repairs were completed last year while others, including refurbishing the clubhouse deck and pool coping, will be considered as our budget and resources permit;
- ❑ Replaced pool solar heating system that had been destroyed by hurricane Milton, fixed pool issues that arose, resulting in a new jockey pump, safety/life rings, a new DE Settling Tank, and a new electric shut-off for solar panel leaks.;
- ❑ Identified location of fuse boxes and created tools to help facilitate maintenance of streetlights in the future;
- ❑ An ongoing number of streetlight bulb and fuse repairs were completed last year. At least two major outages were due to massive oak roots breaking the electrical conduit and requiring outside expertise to excavate and repair broken lines. Those repairs are still underway as the facilities team works with experts to find and repair the wiring. We know this issue will just continue to occur due to our streetlights being surrounded by tree roots.

As a Board, we accomplished several important administrative duties last year:

- ❑ In January of 2025, the corporate filing to preserve our covenants for the next 30 years was completed;
- ❑ In adherence to our covenants, the Board reviewed and approved over twenty Architectural Review Committee requests from owners for home and landscape improvements. We appreciate the work done by our ARC representative and Rivendell's ARC Committee in expediting these requests so owners could proceed on a timely basis;
- ❑ More than 20 updates were made to the Cottages' home page on the Rivendell website to give homeowners easy access to information they need to know.

Over the past two years, the Florida legislature has made numerous changes to state statutes that govern home owner associations. Working with our outside counsel and Secretary, the Board has addressed those changes to ensure our HOA is in compliance with those requirements and a new federal requirement as well:

- ☐ Updated our Assessment Collection Process and Records Retention policy;
- ☐ Registered board members under the Corporate Transparency Act, and finally;
- ☐ Board members completed the mandatory 4 hours of continuing education required annually.

The Board accomplished all of the above while staying within its budget. In fact, preliminary estimates show that a small surplus can be used in 2026 to help keep member's assessments as low as possible without sacrificing quality. And the membership helped by paying all assessments on time.

Now as we enter the 2026 annual election period, I have requests of you.

First, over the last two years we have made great progress moving toward electronic (web-based) voting which makes it easier for the board to administer the process, greatly reducing the work and expense to create, copy, distribute, collect and tabulate paper ballots. Sixty-seven of our 84 homes have now opted in for electronic voting. **We would be very grateful if the remaining owners would opt in as well.** Help is available to anyone who needs assistance.

Second, I want to address the ongoing challenge of recruiting candidates for the board and our committees. In December, the Nominating Committee circulated a memo inviting owners to consider running for the board, as three members' terms are ending this cycle. Unfortunately, no volunteers have come forward to date. While these three members have indicated a willingness to continue serving another term, this represents a missed opportunity to bring in new voices and fresh perspectives as we look to the future.

Collectively, the current board has devoted 26 years of service to this community. Several members have served more than seven years, while others have contributed at least three. As I have shared with many of you, we cannot continue operating at this pace without new volunteers stepping forward, or without considering external support to help share the workload.

We are proud of the time and energy we have invested to keep our community financially sound and visually well maintained, but the current model is not sustainable. Please consider supporting your neighborhood by running for the board or by joining one of our working committees. If you would like to learn more, feel free to contact me or Tom Hickey, Board Secretary.

Marilee Casale

Cottages Board President