

From *My Writing Life: With Advice for the Beginning Writer*  
[www.lakesidepress.com/MyWritingLife.pdf](http://www.lakesidepress.com/MyWritingLife.pdf)  
by Larry Martin  
[drlarry437@gmail.com](mailto:drlarry437@gmail.com)

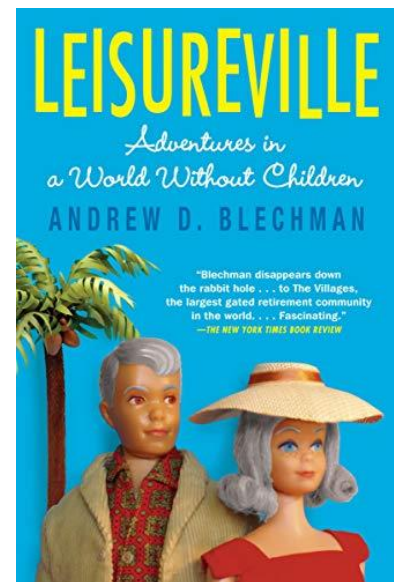
## The Villages, FL – A Rebuttal

To introduce you to The Villages, Florida, take this multiple-choice quiz. All of the following are true *except one*.

1. The Villages was originally founded as a trailer park, in the late 1970s.
2. It is the fastest-growing planned community in the country, spanning three counties, with over 135,000 residents.
3. The average age of residents, most of whom are retirees, is between 60 and 70.
4. It has over 3500 clubs, covering hundreds of activities, including music, writing, dance, art, card playing, multiple sports, and a variety of discussion and book clubs.
5. National media coverage of The Villages, including video documentaries, is generally positive and laudatory.

You likely got it right. The correct answer is number 5. National media coverage, including video documentaries, tend toward the hypercritical, the putdown, the negative image.

Why is that? For an answer, we can start with a popular book by Andrew Blechman, published in 2008 when The Villages (TV) was about a third the size it is now. He wrote the book after a senior couple, neighbors of his in a small Massachusetts town, had retired to The Villages. Curious why they would leave their collection of friends and acquaintances to move to a place where they knew no one, a place “without children,” he visited them for a month. During that month Blechman conducted numerous interviews and experienced the “life style” of his hosts. Then, adding what he learned from extensive research on “age-segregated” communities, he wrote *Leisureville* and subtitled it, pejoratively, “Adventures in a World Without Children.”



The book is entertaining and well-written, but basically a hit job on “age-segregated” retirement communities, where children cannot reside. He gives the history of this type of community, in Arizona and elsewhere. The idea of the nation’s seniors flocking to these childless enclaves bothered him a great deal. For negatives, he highlighted about: sexual escapades of some seniors and the above average amount of sexually transmitted diseases among residents; golf and golf-cart transportation obsessions; the entirely-made-up history posted on official-looking plaques in the town squares; and other quirks of the place.

He also decried that one family owned much of The Villages, and that there is no true democratic government like in a real town or village. And, not least among his concerns: the seniors' migration to The Villages removed tax-paying citizens from states that have a state income tax, and often local income taxes as well, to a state (Florida) with neither.

So, to summarize (and you should read the book) Blechman was against age-segregated communities that deprive northern cities of diversity (less seniors) and taxes, that exclude children, and that are run by a non-democratic government. He likened the whole trend as one of retiring seniors dropping out of society.

Okay, that was years ago. Then we entered the Trump era, and the mainstream media's antipathy to The Villages went into frenzy mode. It became well-publicized that The Villages is overwhelmingly white, that it voted Republican in all elections, and that the founding family running the Villages, the Morses, has long been a top donor to Florida's Republican party. That set the juices flowing, and led to several documentaries and news articles painting TV in a negative light: Republican; Trump; no diversity; no democratic government. The list goes on.

To counter the negative image so often portrayed, I will present a few observations, which are largely ignored or downplayed by left-leaning media.

- People vote with their feet. To decry people moving of their own free will, from one location to another, is to negate the world's history. Numerous examples: the Pilgrims; the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European immigrants to America; the movement of Mormons from the East to Utah; the depopulation of America's cities as the middle class moved to the suburbs; the Great Migration of Blacks to the North in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. People move for various reasons, and to characterize their decision as "dropping out," and see it as a blot on the social construct, is elitist. Worse, it suggests an attitude that would support legislation to limit individual freedom.
- The Villages is booming, and for years has been the fastest growing metropolitan area in the country. People move here from all over, every state of the Union. There are also residents here from Canada and Great Britain, who can stay up to six months a year before returning home. The weather is certainly a draw, but so are the abundance of activities, a lower cost of living compared to most northern urban areas, and the lower taxes. And it's only a small part of Florida, which in 2022 had the fastest-growing population in the country — the first time the state has taken the top spot since 1957.

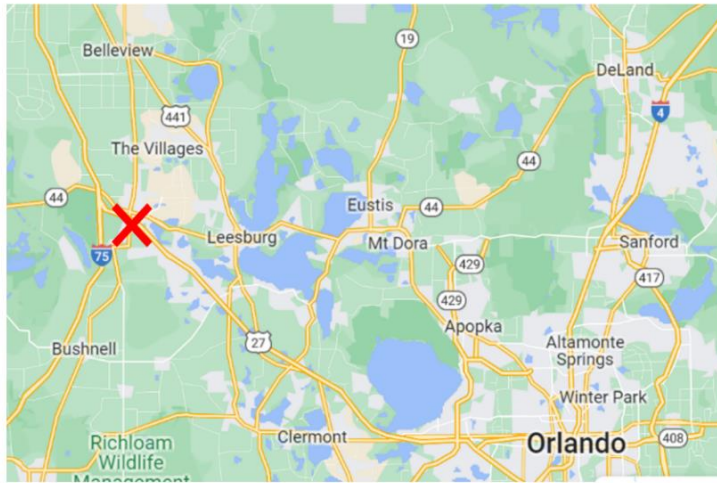


Aerial view of one "village" in The Villages, FL

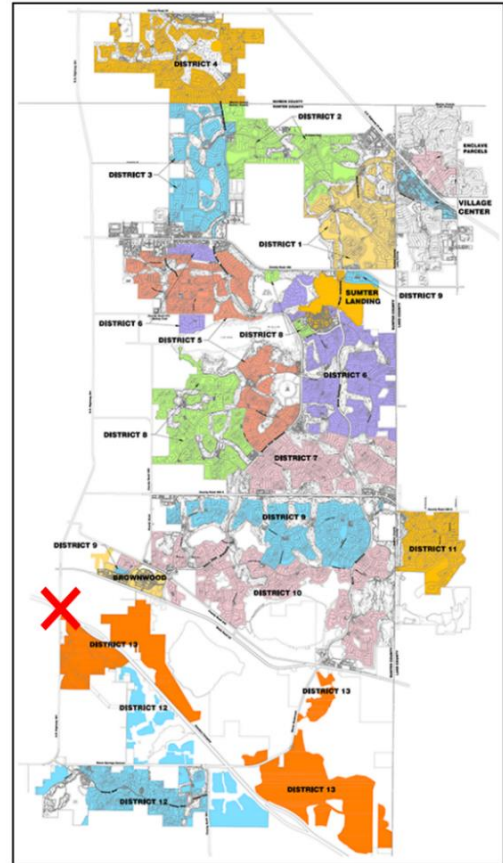


Residents can drive from their home to any place in The Villages via golfcart.

- The Villages now covers approximately 55 square miles, an hour northwest of Orlando by car (see map). It is comprised of about 60 individually-named villages divided into 13 Community Development Districts (CDDs), shown on the second map.  
<https://www.districtgov.org/yourdistrict/districtMapDetail.aspx?district=2>
- Each village has a population ranging roughly between five hundred to twenty-five hundred, or about 10,000 residents per CDD. Each CDD *does not* have its own mayor, vice mayor, police, or fire department; those personnel, and the functions they serve, are part of the county in which residents live. (The Villages spans three: Sumter, Lake, and Marion). Contrast this with the Cleveland suburbs, of which I'm familiar, consisting of many small towns and villages, each with a cadre of paid officials. There is, for example, the city of Mayfield Heights (pop. @ 19,000) and contiguous Mayfield Village (pop. @ 3500), each with its own mayor, town counsel, and administrative staff. Then there are the three contiguous "W" suburbs Willoughby (population @ 22,000), Willowick (pop. @ 14,000), and Wickliff (pop. @ 13,000) with their own officials and staffs. A little further east are Kirtland and Mentor-on-the-Lake, each with a population of about 7,000. And there are many more small towns and villages in the metro area. Result? Very high property taxes to pay for all the duplicated services and personnel. The Villages doesn't have this issue, and one hopes it never will.



In these two maps the red X signifies the junction of Florida's Turnpike and U.S. Hwy 301.



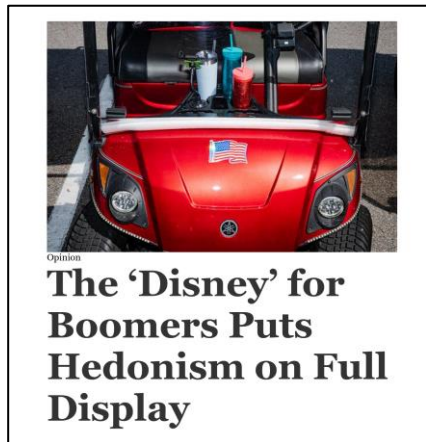
- Among seniors, there is no more sexually transmitted disease (STD) here than anywhere else, A comment was made years ago by a local physician that she was seeing a lot of STD. Somehow the doctor's comment got re-translated into an erroneous statistic, and Blechman fell for it. Florida Health Department statistics show that Sumter County, the population of which is mostly Villagers, actually has a low STD rate.
- The Villages is not a world without children. It's a place where children can't live permanently. Immediately surrounding The Villages are numerous communities with young families. Adjacent to The Villages is a pre-K-12 charter school with over 3300 students that consistently ranks high in math and reading scores. Another charter school will open soon. Many people who live in The Villages have grandchildren, and kids come here all the time to visit. There are special camp activities for kids during Christmas, spring break, and summer months. At least a third of the residents are snowbirds, which means they travel back to their home state for a great part of the year to be with family. It is just that children (defined as under eighteen) can't live here permanently. That's fine with the residents, who have not "dropped out" of society.



- None of video documentaries paint a true picture of the available activities. They focus on frilly things like senior cheerleaders, social clubs, drinking, or golf-cart designs. Or, they focus on unhappy people, as a *New York Times* documentary did a few years ago (“Some Kind of Heaven”). Another video documentary is titled “Golf, Booze & Guns. Inside Boomer Paradise” (available on YouTube). That’s like doing a general documentary on New York City for people who have never been there and calling it “Crime, Homelessness, and Heavy Traffic.” These documentaries don’t mention the extensive music and writing activities in The Villages, the concerts, the discussion clubs, the Enrichment Academy that offers a variety of courses. And they don’t highlight the volunteer work done by thousands of Villagers, or the college scholarship programs sponsored by several clubs, e.g., the Opera Club, and Writers League of the Villages. If all you want to do is denigrate, it’s easy to pick out whimsical things or unhappy people in any community, and focus on just those.



- Print articles are no better. *The New York Times* published a review March 3, 2022, titled “The ‘Disney’ for Boomers Puts Hedonism on Full Display.” It’s author, Michelle Cottle, a member of the Times editorial board, focused mainly on politics and hedonism, only briefly mentioning a few non-frilly activities. She did not do her homework, bringing up the STD angle with: “...for years, the community has fought its reputation (based in part on a 2008 book) as a den of sexual iniquity, where seniors get jiggy in golf carts and S.T.D.s run rampant.” Here she was referring to the misinformation in *Leisureville*, but made no reference to the reputation possibly being “undeserved.” The word for such writing is “biased.” And, she could not avoid that old canard about Disney, in both the title and the text, stating “The enclave has been called Disney for retirees. The comparison is apt, not only because of the nonstop amusements.” Yes, like dozens of book clubs, discussion clubs that deal with a variety of topics, a dozen writing critique clubs, dozens of music clubs which you have to audition for, computer clubs, language clubs, and so much more. Stuff you won’t find at Disney, but never mentioned by Ms. Cottle. To its credit, *The Times* did publish a few rebuttal letters, two by Villages residents, that pointed out the extraordinary bias and omissions in Cottle’s article.



- A frequent criticism of The Villages, brought up by Ms. Cottle, is lack of racial diversity. Only about 1 percent of the population is Black, but nothing prevents Blacks from moving here. There is a large African-American Club, and the Black residents we've met love the place. Furthermore, critics of our lack of diversity never seem to criticize northern cities that are similarly non-diverse racially. Great Barrington Mass is 95% white, 2% African American. Hastings-on-Hudson, NY, where our middle daughter lives, is 87% white, less than 3% African-American. One doesn't read any criticism of these places for their "lack of diversity."
- A main reason for the negative press is largely political. Florida has turned Republican in recent years, and although The Villages has a large Democratic Party club, it does vote Republican. Left-leaning media like the NYT can't abide that, so at every opportunity they will paint a negative picture. When Trump was running for president in 2020, all you saw on CNN were pictures of golf carts with Trump signs. CNN did not show the carts with Biden signs, of which there were many. If you want to criticize something, it's easy to do by omitting information and presenting just one side.
- The original founder of The Villages was Harold Schwartz (1910-2003), who started out with a trailer park in the late 1970s. In the 1980s he joined with his son H. Gary Morse to expand the development into a large retirement community. They named it "The Villages" in 1992. As more and more houses were built and sold, Morse became a billionaire. (Blechman never got to meet Gary Morse, who died in 2014, but he is mentioned in the book.) The Villages is now run by 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation family members. The place is generally well run, but of course every community will have conflicts, disagreements, and opinions about how to manage things. Sometimes these result in lawsuits, and any business the scale of The Villages is likely to find itself the defendant or plaintiff quite often. Having been the victim of injustice in our Cleveland house lawsuit (see "Lawsuit!"), I can sympathize with those who feel wronged in any business situation. The problem is not that there are negative things to write or show about a place as large as TV. The problem is that the media I've encountered never seeks to present a true or balanced picture. It is, in a word, *biased*.
- One Villages institution ripe for criticism by many residents is the daily newspaper, *The Villages Daily Sun*. This is a corporate organ, owned by the developer, and of course avoids printing almost anything negative about TV. It does print a fair amount of syndicated national and international news, and has a comprehensive sports section. Given the huge amount of local advertising, the *Daily Sun* is probably one of the most profitable dailies in the country. But it's not the paper to read if you're looking for negative local news. For that you can go to the website [villages-news.com](http://villages-news.com), which reports just about every arrest for shop lifting, disorderly conduct, and driving while intoxicated. Residents who want another print newspaper can subscribe to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, or *The Orlando Sentinel*, and have them delivered same day to their home.

- The Villages' Barnes & Noble now supports local authors by displaying for sale, in one section near the café, the mostly self-published books by Villages residents. This has taken place only since 2021, following a change in B&N ownership and lobbying by Writers League of The Villages. On the shelf you'll find (plug!) my book, *What Just Landed in The Villages and Other Short Fiction*, <https://www.amazon.com/Landed-Villages-Other-Short-Fiction/dp/0997895969/>. The title story is a tongue-in-cheek account of the sudden landing on a Villages golf course, of a huge monolith from outer space. The writing culture in The Villages is thriving (discussed in another chapter), one of many positive aspects unreported in the documentaries that only want to compare the place to a Disney theme park.



- For seniors The Villages is a much safer place to live than northern cities. Major crime (rape, murder, grand larceny) is very rare. Also, there is less risk of falling (no snow and ice), or climbing injuries, since almost all homes are built without stairs. If you need your smoke detector batteries changed, the fire department comes out to your house for free, climbs a ladder and does it. They don't want seniors climbing ladders if possible.
- Little things. Every place in the Villages is golf-cart accessible: grocery stores, medical offices, banks, etc. If you drive a car or golf cart, you never pay to park; no parking meters. Most intersections of main streets are connected by roundabouts, no lights. Thus, you can drive smoothly from one end of The Villages to another with very few stoplights. Though not adjacent to a big city, there is no lack of shopping, with all the big box stores close by. The Orlando Airport, an hour away, is one of the nation's busiest, so you can get to many destinations without having to change planes.

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I will repeat the first item. *People vote with their feet*. Critics should ask why so many have voted to move to The Villages, and continue to do so, then attempt to give an unbiased review, or at least a more balanced one.