

# 2008 FACILITY OF THE YEAR

SPECIALTY WINNER

## Storsafe Self Storage

Apollo Beach, Florida • Photos courtesy of Storsafe Self Storage



By David Lucas

Winning approval to develop a self-storage facility with outside RV and boat storage is always difficult in Florida; but when it is located on a wetland and in the potential eye of a future hurricane, that makes getting the nod substantially more challenging.

What's more, the Environmental Protection Agency required this unique ecosystem to be restored to its original state through mitigation. Since the area is a potential target for severe hurricanes, the facility—including the canopies for covered RV parking—had to withstand gale-force winds of up to 140 mph.

Storsafe Self Storage chose the 20-acre site in Apollo Beach following a two-year site plan review and approval process that was completed by the previous owner. The site for this premier RV, boat, and self-storage facility is located on U.S. Highway 41 near Sarasota. The *Mini-Storage Messenger's* Facility of the Year Specialty Storage winner offers clients a lushly landscaped facility with state-of-the-art security and amenities including video surveillance and 24/7, fully secured computerized access.



## FACTS AT A GLANCE

### Owner/Managers

America's Capital Partners

### Builder

Mike Carter Construction

### Architect

Design Team West

### Doors

Beeline Supply

### Security

High Security Alarm Systems

### Software

Sentinel Systems Corporation

### Interior Systems

Janus International

Storsafe builder, and Design Team West, the architect, worked with the various parties to meet entitlement requirements.

"Entitlements in Florida are a challenge regardless of where you are," Carter says. "All projects, especially a mixed use project such as this, require discretionary approvals and site plan approval. This property contained a wetland that was significantly impacted by other developers. Our biggest challenge was negotiating and designing the wetland rehabilitation that was required."

The property also had some significant storm water management challenges which required a collection system that contributed to the wetland's viability and ultimately discharged to the jurisdiction's master system.

Despite these challenges, the developers decided this location would be ideal for a storage facility that caters to the many RV and boat owners in the surrounding communities, including Sarasota, Brandon, MiraBay, and Panther

Trace. In a location within close proximity to the Gulf of Mexico and dozens of gated communities, the facility offers a safe haven where owners of luxury RVs and boats could feel comfortable and secure when storing their "toys."

"When the project became available, we grabbed it," says Sergio Socolsky, vice chairman of Miami-based America's Capital Partners, which oversees management of all Storsafe facilities.

Development commenced in the summer of 2007 and the facility opened the following April.

Apollo Beach is situated on the Gulf of Mexico along a portion of Tampa Bay with a beautiful waterfront community and a tropical landscape. The community is on a site where cattle once grazed, citrus fruit grew, and swamplands were widespread. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of the land was low lying and considered uninhabitable. Paul Dickman, whose family owned the land, conceived the idea of a waterfront community. He foresaw the development of a city along U.S. Highway 41 midway between Tampa and Bradenton. The family designed a subdivision with roads, canals, schools, and recreation areas, but it took until 1958 for the first 50 homes to be built along U.S. 41.

The little city of 8,400 residents is reminiscent of the water city Venice in Italy with miles of canals and inlets. Apollo Beach is distinguished by magnificent homes with lush tropical foliage bordering the canals. Most homes have docking facilities on either side of the canal for motorboats, sailboats, and even yachts. It's no surprise that Apollo Beach is a haven for boating and fishing enthusiasts—the kind of clientele Storsafe is targeting.

The Apollo Beach facility is the first time Storsafe has ventured into RV and boat storage. America's Capital Partners, which has a heavy concentration of commercial real estate in Florida, operates three self-storage facilities and has another one under construction. The company also developed and sold other storage facilities in recent years.

The centerpiece of the Storsafe location in Apollo Beach is a three-story, 101,751-square-foot, climate-controlled

## Facing The Challenges

Mike Carter, who heads Mike Carter Construction in Bradenton, Fla., the



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building containing 723 storage units. A 25,200-square-foot standard self-storage building contains 114 units. The units in these buildings range from 5-by-5s to 10-by-30s.

Storsafe offers 392 RV and boat spaces in “garages” that include 115 covered spaces of 12-by-40, 90 covered spaces with adjoining storage of 12-by-60, and seven covered and air-conditioned 20-by-62 spaces. Another 180 uncovered spaces have measurements of 12-by-30.

Solid structures were needed to stand up to Florida’s hurricanes. The main building utilizes a structural steel frame support system. The exterior is fitted with a three-inch composite panel that is covered with a 1.5-inch EFIS system providing R-30 wall insulation. This creates a superior, energy efficient structure. A drive-up building is constructed of bearing masonry with metal roofs.

The company has designed and built self-storage facilities to tough Florida standards for years; however, planning for RV storage added a new wrinkle to the mix. “This is in a coastal area and we had to design the facility for 140-mph sustained winds, which is the highest rating in Florida,” Carter says. “Now we have canopy structures to provide weather protection for RVs and boats, which are huge wings that have to be designed for that 140-mph wind. There isn’t a track record with that product in Florida.”

The 115 covered spaces for RV and boat storage utilize a hybrid pre-engineered metal building system with a single sloped roof for weather protection. The seven fully enclosed RV storage spaces with air conditioning provide a higher level of protection for jumbo RVs up to 60 feet long. The large units have electrical hookups and alarm systems. There is a large, open, paved area outside for boat and RV storage and hurricane-resistant enclosures.

For those seeking a higher level of protection and personal storage space, Storsafe offers 90 hurricane strength shelters, each with an adjoining 10-by-12-foot enclosed area. This allows a client to conveniently and securely store items needed



when using an RV or boat. This area is designed for “the person who wants his RV under cover, wants electricity provided for his RV, and also needs an accessory storage area adjacent to his RV where he’s going to keep lawn chairs, hoses, barbecue grills—all the things he may use on an interim basis when he’s out in his RV,” Carter says.

### \$2 Million RVs

The variety of unit sizes and features was an important element in developing a successful facility. Outside storage is provided for owners of smaller and less expensive boats and trailers. Surrounding this area, Storsafe offers hurricane strength covered storage built to protect a client’s investment from the damaging sun and high winds. “We wanted to accommodate everyone, from the person who just wants to park his RV outside to the guy who wants a fully air-conditioned, enclosed garage for his \$2 million RV,” Carter says.

Storsafe provided an option for the high-end RV owner with seven fully enclosed, climate-controlled units. These 20-by-62 units include 50-amp service, allowing the RV owner to prepare for an outing without ever leaving the security of the unit.

The facility is equipped with a central wash-down area and dump station to accommodate customers who have recently returned with their boats after a day on the water. This allows a returning customer to maintain the vehicle on site prior to putting it up until the next use.

Storsafe’s image as a premier RV, boat, and self-storage facility is conveyed throughout the campus, particularly with the vast stretches of landscaping that greet the eye. After the wetland was filled in, native flora was planted inside this wetland and native pine trees were placed on the perimeter of the site. Maintaining landscaping at this large property presented a financial hurdle. Irrigating with potable water was cost prohibitive, so the developers elected to utilize two existing wells on site. This required additional permitting to proceed, but it was the best solution to keep the facility within budget.

The landscaping enhances the overall appearance of the facility and welcomes visitors who enter the property. The office includes a waiting area richly decorated to make clients feel at home. All outdoor and covered spaces are paved to maximize cleanliness, facilitate drainage, and ensure easy mobility for large vehicles and trailers.

### Market Study Determined Need

While Apollo Beach lies in the midst of a vast recreational playground, the need for RV and boat storage was still not considered a slam-dunk. "We went through a market study to determine if there is a need and to what extent there is need for it," Socolsky says.

Still, the owners undertook a careful study before building the facility to support what their eyes were seeing. "Ultimately we relied on the market study," Socolsky says.

While other self-storage facilities were operating in the area, the market study revealed a need for RV and boat storage. "There is some competition from other storage facilities," Socolsky says. "I don't think there is anything like this facility, which was what attracted us to develop this property. We have boat and RV storage and different types of storage. We have garages that are air-conditioned with hookups for electricity and outside storage, and a climate-controlled building. The fact that we could put all of those uses into one facility was very attractive for us."

Another factor that went into the decision was a growing trend by many homeowners associations and municipalities outlawing open storage, leaving people with no choice but to find an alternative. "Florida is a highly regulated state and one of the regulations that contributed to this facility is that it is virtually impossible to park a boat or RV in a single-family residential property," Carter says.

The specter of rising gas prices and a shaky economy confronted the Storsafe development. Higher diesel prices can put a damper on the RV market. "We gave some thought to it, but at the end of the day I think there is enough of a market for this product and enough inventory of boats and RVs in this area to justify a facility of this nature," Socolsky says. "One of the biggest dealerships in the country for RVs is located in the Tampa area, so there are a lot of RVs in that area. With the number of boats and RVs in the greater Tampa area, there's more than enough in the market to justify this facility. There is no other facility like this in Florida."

While the facility was being built, vigorous construction activity in China and other developing areas around the world escalated prices for building materials. Carter Construction effectively managed this situation to keep costs under control. "We always have to monitor material and labor price fluctuation carefully," Carter says.

"We went through an extensive supplier competitive bid process that required all of the vendors to offer their product at a fixed price and to hold that price for the duration of the project," says Carter. "If you're a supplier whose product is going to be six months out, you have to guarantee us that price prior to us commencing construction. So we mitigate the exposure to fluctuations with that method."

### Marketing The Facility

To market the facility, Storsafe established a Web site before the Apollo Beach facility was completed. Storsafe promoted the facility through direct mail and newspaper advertising with the message, "Give your big toys some well deserved comfort away from the sun and elements."

"We had a billboard on U.S. 41 a couple of months prior to opening the facility. The signage on the property is very visible as well," Socolsky says. "We are also marketing through boat and RV dealerships in the area."


The marketing efforts helped to build occupancy to 17 percent during the first five months of operation. "Occupancy is where we anticipated we were going to be at this stage," Socolsky says.

Sentinel Systems Corporation of Lakewood, Colo., provided the management software package that operates on the facility's four computers. Sentinel's WinSen Property Manager is specifically designed for self-storage operations, and the program even incorporates an RV and boat section. WinSen allows owners and managers to track day-to-day activities, including move-ins and move-outs, take payments, and send out late letters and various mailings to tenants.

WinSen also tracks the financial side of the business with cash flow reports and accounting data.

WinSen Property Manager is a menu-driven system designed to run under Microsoft Windows®. Among the software's features, WinSen has automated letter and notice printing for late pays, extensive report and graph menu, flexible late fee scheduling, custom letters using Microsoft Word®, multiunit payment processing, QuickBooks® interface, integration with Sentinel access and control systems, e-mail reports and letters, automated credit card processing that works with PCCharge™ and ICVerify®, MapPoint® interface, drivers license ID scanner, mobile storage tracking module, receipt printing in auto bill, and online payments and pre-lease.

Storsafe has four other properties using the WinSen software for facility management, according to Nick Coe, a sales representative for Sentinel.

No matter what winds may blow through Apollo Beach, this is one self-storage facility that can accommodate all comers—whether they prefer traditional, climate-controlled, or RV and boat storage. Storsafe offers the ultimate in protection in hurricane strength shelters. 



David Lucas is a freelance writer and editor based in Phoenix, Arizona. He is also the News Editor for the *Mini-Storage Messenger*.

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