

GREENER GROWTH

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GREENER GROWTH

Tampa Bay Area Developers Begin To Embrace Environmentally Friendly Construction

By LAURA KINSLER

The Tampa Tribune

THONOTOSASSA -- Robert Thomas wanted to keep his family's 14,000 acres a working ranch forever, but as subdivisions in New Tampa and Wesley Chapel crept closer, the Thomases relented.

The owners of Two Rivers Ranch decided to develop half of the property, including nearly 2,000 acres in Hillsborough County.

The plan is to carve out a subdivision unlike any other in New Tampa.

The amount of land set aside as nature preserves would triple, and homeowners would have the option to buy houses that are certified green, which means the

house meets certain requirements to be considered environmentally progressive.

"We're on the cutting edge of this, but I think we'll see a lot more of it in the future," Thomas said. "There's a whole movement toward sustainable development."

His plan has encountered a hitch. The state demands more proof that utilities and roads can handle the new residents surrounding an environmentally sensitive area that includes Hillsborough River State Park.

Another developer 35 miles south in Hillsborough County is angling to become the first in the county to offer green building on a large scale - Newland Communities' 5,000-home community, Waterset.

It isn't easy being green. The Florida Green Building Coalition, which sets the criteria for green projects, defines a qualifying development as one that incorporates environmental, ecological and sustainability features throughout the process. The builder must earn 200 points out of a possible 600 for certification.

The University of South Florida's School of Architecture and Community Design is turning out dozens of graduates every year who are committed to sustainable development. Its dean, Charles Hight, predicts that green building will become the norm in this generation.

"It's past due for the Tampa Bay region," Hight said. "We have a very precarious environment and ecology that can easily be destroyed."

Specific codes vary from state to state, and some require energy-saving or recycled materials that can often add thousands of dollars to a home's cost. Developers, however, think consumers are ready to pay the price. Besides, they say, rising oil costs and construction material price inflation could help make the decision easier for consumers in the future because the houses are designed to be cheaper to operate.

"Wal-Mart is going green, and McDonald's just finished its first green restaurant," said Mike Houston, president of the building coalition. "If major corporations are doing it, you have to believe it will catch on pretty soon."

Grass Is Greener To The South

Three Tampa Bay area developers are planning large-scale green communities in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties, but in many ways, Tampa is playing catch-up to its southern neighbors.

"I don't know that I would say Tampa is behind the trend, but Sarasota and Naples have been out in front," Houston said. "In those communities, it was a matter of intense competition and some builders trying to distinguish themselves from others."

Bobby Lyons builds Arthur Rutenberg homes in New Tampa, Wesley Chapel and Fort Myers. He's

completed about a half-dozen green-design houses in Fort Myers, but none in the Tampa market.

Lyons said he hasn't seen that demand in the Tampa market, partly because building green can add 3 percent to the cost of a new house.

"That may not seem like much when the average home sells for \$280,000," Lyons said. "But you do find people where that puts them on the edge of being able to afford the house."

The green building movement is really more about marketing than saving the environment, said Marvin Rose, who publishes a monthly report on the area's housing market. Tampa home buyers are more concerned with affordability.

"I haven't seen a groundswell of people demanding it," he said.

Darden Rice, of the Tampa Bay Sierra Club, disagrees. She said the area has a pent up demand for green options, as evidenced by the 5,000 people who attended the inaugural Pinellas Living Green Expo in June in St. Petersburg.

The lack of empirical evidence for consumer demand doesn't worry Don Whyte, regional president of Newland Communities. He said the company decided to build green in Tampa anyway.

"The more we looked into green construction, the more we realized we needed to do this," Whyte said. "Our customers are not really aware of what green building is, but they will over time. We're right at the tipping point now."

The Thomas family spent two years working with Hillsborough County planners to create a special land classification for an "environmental planned community" for its Two Rivers Ranch project on U.S. 301 south of the Pasco County line. The site is just north of the Hillsborough River State Park and on the path of the proposed outer beltway.

"We could rezone this and put in 1,900 homes, but we have a legacy to protect," Thomas said. "My grandfather donated the land for Hillsborough River State Park in 1936. We thought there ought to be some buffering in the land uses around the river. So we got together with our land planners and decided we should take a different approach."

It's also a business decision for Thomas. Without the rezoning, he would be limited to building 210 units on 5-acre lots with septic tanks. The new land classification allows him to build 968 houses with Tampa water and sewer.

"The increase in density works as an incentive to spend the extra money for environmental protection," Thomas said. "We come out with a net gain to the environment."

In addition, builders may qualify for federal income tax credits of \$2,000 for each house that meets the energy reduction standards.

La Entrada Takes Shape

In Grady Pridgen's perfect world, you wouldn't need a car and you'd never get a power bill. He plans to transform a former sod farm on 133 acres in St. Petersburg into one of the state's largest mixed-use developments to be certified green.

Pridgen, a member of the building coalition, said he began studying green construction techniques about seven years ago.

"I got horrifying estimates of future costs for gas and utilities," he said. "In 10 years, gas could cost \$9 a gallon and utility costs will triple. I began to consider green options. The community needs to be walkable or connected to mass transit."

The first phase of the La Entrada project, 700,000 square feet of industrial space, is under way with the construction of new facilities for coupon distributor Valpak and Halkey-Roberts Corp., a medical equipment manufacturer.

Construction of nearly 2,500 condominiums and apartments is scheduled to start next year. The plan also calls for a hotel, office space and retail uses. Pridgen decided to include apartments so that people of all income levels would be able to afford to live at La Entrada.

"This is a personal mission of mine," Pridgen said. "I have the largest assemblage of land in Pinellas County. It's my obligation to provide a sustainable, urban mixed-use model."

Though he won't achieve zero-cost utilities, Pridgen thinks he can cut water and electric bills by as much as 75 percent.

St. Petersburg Certification

It's no coincidence Pridgen picked St. Petersburg as the test market for his new product. City leaders have been supportive of green building and have applied to become the state's first certified green government.

The city has purchased hybrid vehicles and designated staff to teach builders about green construction. It also offers to fast-track building permits for green developments.

Pridgen has three more green projects planned for St. Petersburg, including a mixed-use complex near Tropicana Field. The Central Avenue project combines retail and office space with 325 condominiums and the Florida Sports Hall of Fame.

Another home builder that wants to focus on green building is Oldsmar's Nohl Crest Homes. The company completed a green showcase home in FishHawk Ranch for this year's Tour of Homes. Judy Preston, marketing director, said all of their future homes would meet Florida Green Building Coalition standards.

"We could see that there was a movement in this direction," she said.

For now, people must drive south to Sarasota, Fort Myers and Bradenton to see green developments at work. The trend is moving up the Gulf Coast because of growing customer demand, Rice said.

"In Sarasota, you're seeing the results of 10 or 12 years of planning," she said.

(CHART) BUILDER POINTS

Developers earn points toward certification for using environmentally friendly planning and green construction techniques. They must earn at least 200 for certification. The following are ways developers can earn points.

Preservation

- Redevelop an existing site (0-40 points)
- Include conservation areas and parks (0-50 points)
- Reuse or recycle materials on site (0-10 points)
- Community gardens

(0-10 points)

Circulation

- Sidewalks and bike trails (0-12 points)
- Provide connections, shelters for public transportation (0-20 points)
- Plant native shade trees along streets (0-6 points)
- Use low-wattage streetlights, solar-powered lights (0-10 points)
- Streets should be oriented so that homes get less direct sunlight (8 points)

Utilities

- Use solar power in common areas and private buildings (0-25 points)
- Use reclaimed water or stormwater for irrigation

(0-15 points)

Amenities

--Provide neighborhood parks (0-4 points)

--Community pool for developments with single-family homes (0-4 points)

--Golf course should be certified by Audubon International (6 points)

Deed Restrictions

--Require each property owner to comply with Florida Green Building Coalition standards (40 points)

--Dedicated staff consultants for green landscaping, construction and interior design (16 points)

--First building on site earns green designation and is available for purchase

(4 points)

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Photo credit: Tribune photo by CANDACE C. MUNDY

Photo: A certified green housing development is slated for part of Robert Thomas' Two Rivers Ranch. "There's a whole movement toward sustainable development," he said.

Photo credit: Tribune photos by MARK GUSS

Photo: In Lakewood Ranch's "Green Gallery," a skylight joined to a solar tube is on display. Natural lighting can keep energy costs low.

Photo: Recycled glass tile is one feature that can help a house qualify for green certification, along with renewable material use.

Photo: A bathroom light switch with a built-in fan timer can improve a house's energy rating. Some houses have solar-powered fans.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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