

New development wants to nurture nature

# Conservation Community

Centerville wants to be a 'role model for North Florida'



The Centerville development in northeast Leon County bills itself as the first "conservation subdivision" in the region.

By Bruce Ritchie  
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Developers of a new subdivision in northeastern Leon County say they're working to keep deer, quail, turkeys and gopher tortoises as residents even after people move in.

The Centerville development will include 200 homes, but about 70 percent of the 975 acres will remain natural, says Jon Kohler, managing partner with the Conservation Community Group LLC. The development also is using intensive land-management practices, including planting food plots for wildlife and burning underbrush in the pine forests.

Kohler calls Centerville the first "conservation community" in the Tallahassee region - and some planners generally agree. Such developments, also called conservation subdivisions, generally cluster homes on smaller lots to preserve natural areas.

"It is really a pretty big responsibility to do this right," Kohler said. "Twenty years from now, we want this project to look like it does today and be a role model for North Florida."

Centerville, which announced its development plans last month, has won over some opponents, including neighbors and environmentalists. The development has begun accepting contracts for lots and is awaiting final development approval from Leon County.

Planner and author Randall Arendt coined the term conservation subdivision in the 1990s, but there is no firm criteria for what meets the definition, said Neil Fleckenstein, a planner with the Red Hills Conservation program at Tall Timbers Research Station.

Fleckenstein said he can't say whether Centerville is the first conservation subdivision in the area, although it does meet some of the criteria for the designation. And he said he thinks the development has done a good job.

"I'm encouraged by the amount of land they have set aside," he said.

Kohler says he prefers to call Centerville a conservation community rather than a conservation subdivision - which he says makes it sound too urban.

The development first was proposed in 2003 before Leon County adopted rules to encourage conservation sub-

divisions. Under the county rules, developers can build up to one unit per acre - up to three times more than is allowed in the urban fringe land-use designation - if they permanently protect at least half of their land, said David McDevitt, the county's director of development services.

The Centerville development will donate development rights on about 660 acres to a nonprofit group that will be determined within the next year, Kohler said.

The development at Pisgah Church and Centerville roads features spacious pine forests with a lush, green carpet of vegetation along gently sloping landscape.

There are plenty of sounds - from wildlife rather than traffic and people.

The cries of the large pileated woodpeckers echo through the forest, competing with the siren sound of cicadas. A kingfisher chatters before landing on a tree limb above a pond where small alligators patrol near a fish-feeding machine.

Supporters say the development plans are special because of the amount of dry land that would be preserved - not just the ponds and wetlands where development is restricted by local land-use regulations. The plans include a wiregrass savannah that will remain protected along with a gopher-tortoise preserve along the western property boundary.

Fire is critical to maintaining pine forests and their lush understory in the South. Without it, hardwoods would crowd out the pines and prevent sunlight from reaching grasses and other plants on the forest floor, biologists say.

Prices for lots start at \$225,000. Homeowners will be required to pay about \$1,000 a year in dues to maintain the open space as well as community facilities such as a planned lake house, Kohler said.

He said there are no critics of the development because he's worked with anyone who was concerned.

Biologist Matt Aresco opposed the development in 2003. He says now that homes and a road were proposed to go through the gopher-tortoise preserve before he objected.

Aresco blames the earlier proposal on miscommunication between environmental consultants and the developers. He says Kohler has the interests of the land at heart - and that it's reflected in the development plan.

"Is it as good as preserving the entire site in a conservation ease-

ment?" Aresco said. "That is always the ideal situation.

"But knowing that some development has to occur, it's better than the alternative, which is your typical subdivision where you are not conserving anything really," he said.

Kohler said there also were other factors that helped decide how to preserve gopher tortoises.

"It would be safe to say we listened to his (Aresco's) opinions and valued his opinions," Kohler said.

Deborah Newhall, who lives in Havana but owns property along Pisgah Church Road, said she's worried trees may be cut down to widen and pave the road to accommodate development.

"That's the way it goes - progress, you know," she said.

There is no plan for widening the road, said Joe Brown, the county's director of engineering services. The county is working with the developer on an agreement to stabilize the existing roadway without taking out any trees.



Residents of the nearby Baker Place neighborhood were concerned about traffic and more homes, but those concerns have been resolved, said Charlotte Chuites, a past president of the Baker Place Homeowners Association.

"I can't say enough nice things about it," Chuites said of the development. "The naysayers are true believers."

Leon County Commissioner Dan Winchester said the development should serve as a model for preserving the rural landscape.

"I think it charts a new course for development patterns in Leon County and I hope throughout the state and potentially a model for the rest of the country," he said.

While some other developers may emphasize their open space, Kohler says his development is different.

He said the Centerville development is committed to conservation and is hiring experienced land managers to make sure that wildlife, as well as people, have a home there.

"This is the real deal," Kohler said.

