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At home with nature

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For some new residential developments in the region, the defining feature is not what's being built, but what's not. Faced with an abundance of swim-club and golf-course communities in the Charlotte area, some middle- and upper-end residential developers hope to differentiate themselves with a focus on the aesthetics and recreational opportunities of the land itself. These nature-preserve communities set aside substantial areas of open space, often going beyond the dictates imposed by zoning, wetlands and water-quality restrictions.

But this "less is more" approach doesn't necessarily mean fewer amenities. The Sanctuary, Crescent Communities' new Lake Wylie project, will boast a 4,500-square-foot lodge on a 17-acre waterfront campsite, along with an amphitheater, pavilion, three swimming pools, a spa and tennis courts. A full-time onsite naturalist from Audubon International will lead nature walks, organic-gardening classes and other outdoor-oriented activities for residents. Roughly 20 miles of trails will wind through 215 acres of common open space, leading to overlooks, meditation areas and recreational parks with children's playgrounds.

"I see the whole 1,300 acres as a preserve," says Allen Harrington, The Sanctuary's project manager at **Crescent Resources**. He notes less than 20% of land area will be developed, due to the large lot sizes (between 2 and 13 acres) and designated building envelopes of The Sanctuary's 188 home sites. In addition to first-phase lots bought by builders, 30 sites became available to the public through a drawing on Sept. 25.

HighGate's set-aside seen as inducement to buy

In Union County, **Harrington/Dowd** used Weddington's new voluntary conservation zoning ordinance to give the HighGate development a distinctive sense of space. "In Weddington, you're going to have large lots to start with, so the question you have to ask is, what sets you apart?" says Gene Harrington, a partner at Harrington/Dowd. "With this ordinance, for every acre you build on, you reserve an acre."

While the conservation zoning did not increase the allowed density of the project, it did give the developer more flexibility with setbacks, lot sizes and other aspects of the site plan.

"On the right piece of property, the zoning would be such that you could preserve topography and not lose the yield on the property," Harrington says.

The community includes 50 houses (with an average sale price of \$900,000) on 1-acre lots fronting a 65-acre nature reserve, as well as a common park with fountains, bridges and

walking trails.

"Generally, when you think of natural areas in a development, you're thinking of flood plains or other unbuildable property," says Harrington. "Here, a good half of the land was buildable. Here, the amenity was low density and open space."

The developer looked at other amenity packages during its market research. "With golf, we found that most people in that market had already joined a club. And unless everybody's a member, you can't support it," says Harrington.

From a cost perspective, building and maintaining a swim club would have been a "flip of a coin," roughly equivalent to the cost of preserving extra land. Harrington says the need for a pool was diminished because about a quarter of the homes have their own. Harrington/Dowd made a conscious choice not to offer all things to all people.

"As you ride into HighGate, you have the sense of space," says Harrington. "With a swimming pool, we felt like it would just have been an enormous subdivision."

The Palisades' open space

Back on Lake Wylie, Rhein Interests seeks to incorporate the feel of a nature-preserve community into a different kind of development -- one with a full range of amenities and substantially higher housing density. Plans for The Palisades call for 2,000 units on 1,500 acres, ranging in price from \$250,000 to \$2 million -- as well as a golf course, tennis courts, swimming pools and an equestrian center. Rhein plans to leave more than 30% of the property as open space, using seven miles of hiking and equestrian trails to connect the community's neighborhoods.

"The land and water-quality plans on which Palisades were based cost over \$1 million and include some of the most innovative measures in the state to protect wildlife and water quality," says Glenna Musante, Palisades spokeswoman.

The use of natural areas around the golf courses will reduce the need for fertilizer and insecticide. Culverts under roads will provide safe crossings for animals. Faced with unconfirmed reports of a bald eagle sighting, Rhein asked an Audubon International expert to locate potential nesting sites for the birds to create "no build" buffer zones around the trees.

Snakes not an amenity

The developers behind nature-preserve communities believe wildlife will be a selling point for home buyers. But real estate consultant Karla Knotts, head of **Land Matters**, is not convinced such developments have broad market appeal. "A lot next to a creek might be a positive for some buyers, but not for others," she says. "I don't consider snakes an amenity."

What is that customer base? "Birkenstocks are part of it," she quips. She's also skeptical of the overall trend. "It's just a marketing spin. It meets a certain buyer's need, but you probably (don't want to) pay more for the open space versus other amenities."

George Maloomian, owner and developer of Eastfield Village in north Charlotte, says even in a

mid-range development (townhomes there start in the \$190,000s), features such as a nature preserve, ponds and walking trails command a premium. "There's no doubt about it," he says. "When you can create a treed or open space with homes backing up or facing on to it, those homes sell very quickly."

"We are seeing the markets becoming more and more aware of the value of open space," says David Cable, executive director of the **Catawba Lands Conservancy**. He warns Mecklenburg County is losing 41 acres of open space per day to development. Open space is part of a region's quality of life, Cable argues, adding the natural environment is often a key to relocating businesses and to highly mobile, educated professionals within a global economy. "People now have a choice of where they want to live," he notes.

Harrington encountered this phenomenon when, to his surprise, HighGate began attracting a nationwide audience. He says roughly half of home sales have been to buyers who were relocating from outside the Charlotte area.

"We are getting traffic from people who don't have to be home-based anywhere," says Harrington. "It's been more successful than we even dreamed about."

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