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Green Acres

It's the Place to Be

By Jennifer S. Cowley
and Steve R. Spillette

Many people dream of living in the country, where they can enjoy fresh air, ride a horse, see the stars and relish the tranquility, leaving the hustle-bustle of city noise and traffic behind. More and more Texans are making this dream come true. Construction of new residential developments beyond city suburbs is occurring at a rapid rate across the state. Among the fastest-growing forms of exurban residential development is the restricted rural subdivision.

The number of restricted rural subdivisions in Texas has been increasing since the mid-1990s. These developments are generally characterized by residential lots ranging from a half acre to 20 acres, and, unlike traditional rural developments, often include deed restrictions requiring site-built homes as opposed to manufactured homes. Some of these subdivisions are located adjacent to major natural attractions such as lakes, but many are in locations considered appealing simply for their "country" atmosphere.

Developments vary in style and featured amenities from region to region, but several characteristics are common to the projects, including:

- large lots and low densities;
- installed amenities, such as entrance gates, perimeter fencing, lakes, equestrian facilities and greenbelts; and
- extensive deed restrictions and architectural controls regarding home construction, deadlines for beginning construction, size, architectural style and farm animals.

A significant share of exurban projects are occurring in areas with convenient access to major urban areas as well as attractive terrain. Popular regions include the Hill Country, the woodlands and prairies to the north and west of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, the hills southwest of Fort Worth, the Piney Woods of East Texas and the rolling countryside of south central Texas.

Most restricted rural subdivisions are located in unincorporated areas administered at the county level. Developers and homeowners alike are subject to county subdivision regulations regarding roads, water supply (typically homeowner wells) and sewage disposal (typically septic systems).

Demand for exurban residential housing is coming from several segments of the population, including retirees, second-home buyers and relocating local buyers. In many areas, the highest demand is coming from a fourth group — nonlocal, suburban working families. Exurban residential developers report that this group is generally seeking a lifestyle change. They are disenchanted with the suburbs, which they feel are too dense and "cookie cutter," with congested roads, dangerous schools and a too-complex quality of life. They want a peaceful country atmosphere and more space between homes. Many are looking for a home where they can have a horse on or near the property.

Environmentally conscious buyers are also among those drawn to exurban residential projects. Developers cater to this population by emphasizing use of open space and preservation of native habitats.

Many exurban subdivisions are within reasonable daily commuting distance to employment centers. Others more distant from employment often appeal to people in professions with nontraditional workweeks, such as firefighters, who work multiday shifts and consequently commute fewer times each week. Telecommuting also is reported to be significant in many of Texas' exurban communities.

Somervell County, with its archaeological attractions and rocky knolls of Glen Rose, is the site of a number of new exurban subdivisions. Donna and Doug Hutchinson of Somervell Partners L.L.C. have been involved in several exurban projects in the area. According to Donna Hutchinson, only since the late 1990s have residential lots become widely available in the Glen Rose area. Demand is now so strong that there are not enough builders to keep up with construction demand.

Land price appreciation in rural Somervell County has been strong with good tracts now selling for as much as \$5,500 to \$6,500 per acre. For platted lots in a gated rural subdivision with underground utilities and curb and gutter roads, prices are typically \$49,000 per acre.

Developments in Somervell County, which is about an hour from Fort Worth, are popular with Metroplex-area firefighters, airline pilots and others who commute only once or twice a

week. Many are moving from Plano and other suburbs and seek a quieter, less dense environment. The area also attracts retirees who enjoy nearby inexpensive golf and high-quality, local medical facilities.

Somervell Partners took advantage of the diversity of potential buyers and created Vista Ridge near Glen Rose, billed as a "community for generations." Part of the development is age-restricted to 55 and older and consists of zero-lot-line garden homes overlooking a park. The rest of the development is located on a ridge and consists of one-acre minimum lots with views. Minimum home size in this section is 2,800 square feet.

Other projects in the area cater to various income levels and market segments. The Oaks, a 300-acre development, has five- to 15-acre lots at \$5,500 per acre. Buyers must build a minimum 1,500-square-foot, site-built home within a year and are limited to two farm animals (no swine or exotics) per two acres. Ridgeview Estates offers five- to 20-acre lots at \$6,500 per acre

and requires a minimum 1,800-square-foot home with at least three-quarter masonry exterior. This development has proved popular with affluent doctors and engineers with numerous homes valued at more than \$1 million. The Hutchinsons are planning to add to the array of local exurban projects by creating habitat-preserving projects in the coming years.

Restricted rural subdivisions and other forms of exurban development are growing trends and should remain so for many years to come in Texas. For more information on developing an exurban residential project, see Center technical report 1470, *Exurban Residential Development in Texas*, which can be ordered by completing the order form at the back of this magazine. ♣

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