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Make Tracks, Chickens, It's A ... New Wimauma

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Two upscale developments will change the landscape in this rural community.

WIMAUMA — The character of this hardscrabble rural outpost will soon be changing. For much of the past decade, Wimauma's main thoroughfare — two-lane State Road 674 — has remained unchanged. It is dotted with convenience stores fortified with barred windows, garages and tire shops with aging facades that spill almost into the street, a small grocery, and a Mexican bakery.

There is no drugstore, chain supermarket, bank or franchise restaurant. Most of the locally owned eateries specialize in Mexican food that targets Wimauma's large Latino population.

Wimauma's 33598 ZIP code, which covers some 86 square miles in rural southeast Hillsborough County, soon will become home to two upscale residential developments. In one, homes will sell for up to \$800,000, and in the other, the upper range will be in the mid-300,000s.

The median home price in Wimauma was \$79,900 when the last census was taken in 2000. The community's population of about 4,200 will more than double when new homes already approved by the county or on the drawing boards are built during the next few years.

The existing housing stock varies from a neighborhood of tidy ranch homes on sprawling lots on the shores of Lake Wimauma to dilapidated mobile homes with broken windows patched with plywood off S.R. 674.

Affordable homes also are on the horizon. Centex Homes wants permission to build 750 houses on 193 acres along S.R. 674. Sanwa Growers' packing house and offices occupy that site but will be moving to Tampa. And Beazer Homes is preparing to build 2,200 homes on the former 932-acre Diehl tomato farm along U.S. 301 north of 19th Avenue, with home prices ranging from the mid-130,000s to the mid-200,000s.

Once Upon A Whistle-Stop

Wimauma's new residents will have a Wal-Mart supercenter, which is to open next year at U.S. 301 and S.R. 674, and a new school to handle the scores of children expected to live in the new communities.

Right now there is only one school in town: Wimauma Elementary. The historic school, built in 1926, housed students in grades one through 12 for more than 25 years and

currently houses kindergarten through fifth-grade students. Throughout the life of the school — even when it housed high schoolers — it retained the name Wimauma Elementary.

For much of that time it was open only to white students. Black students traveled to old Sun City for classes and later to Bethune School until Wimauma Elementary and East Bay High School became integrated.

Vivian Swiger, 64, attended Wimauma Elementary through 11th grade, when the older students were transferred to the new East Bay High School. She was in East Bay's first graduating class in 1958. She remembers growing up in the house behind her father's grocery store on S.R. 674.

"We had everything at the store: food, material, thread, zippers, medicines," she said. "We had one of the few telephones in town, and my daddy was always running around town delivering messages to people."

"Wimauma was a busy train stop back then," Swiger said.  
"My daddy used to take the train to town [Tampa] to bank or go to the doctor."

Forty years ago, when the early construction of the Sun City Center retirement community was under way, Swiger said the lumber was still being delivered by train to Wimauma. The railroad no longer runs through Wimauma, and all the track has been removed.

### Mixed Emotions

Swiger has mixed feelings about the changes coming to her community, where three generations of her family have lived and where her son and his family continue to live.

"My concern is all the traffic here. The roads are already busy," she said. "I've enjoyed most living here when we didn't have to lock our doors. But we have to move along; change is going to happen."

Wimauma's new upscale developments are planned for areas off or along U.S. 301, a road that has served as a divider between Wimauma and Sun City Center.

The smaller of Wimauma's upscale developments, Lake Toscana, will be the county's first conservation subdivision. The developer, Prisa Group, plans to build 97 homes on nearly 500 acres. It will put more than 50 percent of its land into conservation areas, which allows the homes to be clustered on smaller lots than would be allowed under the existing one-house-per-5-acres zoning.

Lake Toscana, which will be a gated community, is outside the urban service area — the area where the county encourages growth and extends utilities. The development will not have public water and sewer.

The subdivision will include a 20-acre circular "lake" that will flow for two miles around the homes. Homeowners are guaranteed either a view of the water or conservation lands. None of the houses will have adjoining back yards.

To the north, G.L. Homes is beginning work on its Valencia Lakes project, a 2,900-home retirement community. The development includes more than 1,300 acres to the north of S.R. 674 and east of U.S. 301.

### Changes May Come Slow

Creation of upper-scale neighborhoods in rural areas doesn't always mean the community's core will change quickly.

MiraBay has an Apollo Beach ZIP code but straddles the area between Apollo Beach and Ruskin. It is not far from Ruskin's historic downtown area along U.S. 41. Developer Newland Communities has sold about 500 of the 1,350 lots at MiraBay, where homes in the gated development range from the mid-200,000s for a villa duplex to \$5 million for some of the high-end, single-family units.

MiraBay's arrival has not yet brought any significant changes to the downtown Ruskin area, and Apollo Beach has seen only slight changes.

In Apollo Beach, the community's main commercial and retail center has undergone a renovation with the arrival of a new Publix. In Ruskin, there has been a change of owners at several restaurants. But in both Apollo Beach and Ruskin, there are still no Starbucks coffee shops or ! pricey restaurants to appeal to the tastes of the higher-income residents nearby.

MiraBay marketing manager Paula Elliott said additional shopping and services are planned in the town center portion of the development, but that project is not scheduled to begin for at least 18 months. MiraBay's lack of impact on Ruskin is a good thing for some residents.

Sandy Council, a longtime Ruskin resident, said that although change is inevitable, "we would like to retain the quality of life we so cherish."

What she has discovered, she said, is that the MiraBay residents she has met also are interested in keeping the community's character.

Council, who operates a booth at the community's Saturday farm market, said the people she meets are interested in the community.

"I think they like the friendliness in the community and are trying to fit in here," she said. "They come down to the farm market to buy fresh veggies and fruit and home-baked bread. We exchange recipes. They don't stay inside their gated community but are out in the community, participating."