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“Making Conservation a Selling Point”

St. Petersburg Times

A new residential community near Wimauma is the first in Hillsborough County to be granted the designation of "conservation subdivision."

Lake Toscana will have 97 homes on 1- and 2-acre homesites on 487 acres of former tomato farm bordered by the Little Manatee River and the Little Manatee Preserve. The zoning designation requires that at least 50 percent of the land be undeveloped. Lake Toscana's developers say they will leave more than 60 percent of their land untouched. The designation allows developers to do "smaller lots than permitted by the zoning because they're leaving more open space," said Dennis Kline, principal planner in the Hillsborough County Planning and Land Development Department. The Lake Toscana parcel was zoned for 5-acre lots.

"They can't create more lots," Kline said. "It's not the simplest thing in the world, and it doesn't work on everybody's property."

A developer must set aside acreage above and beyond wetlands, and there may or may not be enough upland to make a project work. Certain property configurations make it impossible. Developing on smaller lots and leaving more of the property untouched means less - and less costly - infrastructure, as well as a selling point. The advantage to the county is that more open space is preserved.

Lake Toscana, with an overall price tag of \$35-million to \$40- million, is the first project in the Tampa Bay area for the development team of PRISA Group, which is based in Puerto Rico, and its partner, Hacienda Los Angeles. PRISA developed the Dorado Beach Resort in Puerto Rico with the Hyatt Corp. and has about 4,500 residential units in planning or construction in Puerto Rico. The company says it has annual sales of more than \$100-million. Hacienda Los Angeles has 500 multifamily units under way in South Florida and Jacksonville.

"We've been thinking about Central Florida for about eight years now," project developer Federico Stubbe said. "The opportunities are huge to do something different and create a lot of value vis-a-vis what others bring to the table right now."

The conservation zoning, he said, "is the smartest use of land that you'll see here, instead of cookie-cutter 40-foot-wide lots next to your neighbor." He said he is looking for other land for similar projects.

The developers are the project's builders as well. Homes, including a 1-acre homesite, will range in price from the mid \$300,000s to just more than \$500,000, Stubbe said. They will

be one- story homes with three floor plans: 2,600 to 3,200 square feet; 2,850 to 3,500; and 3,200 to 4,000.

"People are telling us, I want a not-so-huge, nice house, a house with a nice number of rooms on a beautiful site," Stubbe said. The houses, inspired by Tuscan farm architecture, will have an "elegant, rustic feel," with stone accents and optional metal roofs, he said.

"They will all be very wide," he said. "Take your typical Florida L-shaped home and stretch it sideways to maximize the views." That design is aimed at making the homes look right on the wide homesites: a standard lot will be 180 feet wide and 250 feet deep. All the homes back onto the lake and have water or green-space views, and no home faces the back of another, Stubbe said. The project is not a Community Development District, in which homeowners pay off bonds that finance the infrastructure.

The project's target market, Stubbe said, is empty-nesters, families with older children, singles, people who work from home. "Young families with kids, that's not who we target. The active adult, that's not who we target. It's everything in between, one big hodgepodge of a market. That segment as a percentage of the market is becoming larger and larger."

As a newcomer in the competitive Tampa Bay home building market, the company will face the challenges of creating name recognition against better-known builders and high-profile communities, and of finding subcontractors when workers are already in high demand for home construction and hurricane repairs. Stubbe said he has hired supervisors from some national builders with ties to Tampa Bay and relationships with reliable subcontractors.

The project is off U.S. 301 on Saffold Road in southern Hillsborough County, near the Sun City Center retail area and about 6 miles from Interstate 75. There will be nature and jogging trails, gardens, and a 60-acre lake for kayaking and fishing. The undeveloped land will be owned by the homeowners association.

An advertising campaign will begin next month and a model is expected to open in July. Century 21 Beggins in Apollo Beach is handling sales. The Web site is www.laketoscana.com.