

Planned communities, key to positive Belle Chasse growth

By Terri Sercovich of The Plaquemines Gazette

Belle Chasse was already growing at a steady pace before Hurricane Katrina spared the northernmost town of Plaquemines Parish, sending thousands of residents from lower and Eastbank Plaquemines to “up the road.”

Residents of Belle Chasse before the storm feared that water and sewerage infrastructure could not keep up as property was subdivided and sold without any forethought or planning.

The parish council placed a two-year moratorium on new development in hopes of having updated infrastructure in place when the moratorium expired. But Katrina shifted the council’s focus and infrastructure issues have not fully been addressed.

In fact, residents of Belle Chasse have had to deal with the additional onslaught of traffic caused by so many more residents.

So this summer, when four signs went up on Woodland Highway, a state road that itself is due to be widened, advertising the future neighborhood of The Parks of Plaquemines, a 750-house master-planned gated community, Belle Chasse residents wondered, “What kind of impact will this place have on us?”

“It’s a positive impact,” responds developer David Waltemath.

Waltemath is a second-generation developer from Algiers. His father is responsible for the neighborhoods of Tall Timbers and Park Timbers also in Algiers. Waltemath followed in his father’s footsteps developing Lakewood Estates in New Orleans, The Highlands of Santa Maria in Baton Rouge and The Estates of Northpark in Covington, as well as co-developing English Turn.

Now he is in Plaquemines.

“I’ve literally wanted to buy this property for the last 15 years,” said Waltemath. Finally, he closed on the first 100-acres in January 2008.

“It’s a very large-scale master-plan community,” Waltemath said. And current Belle Chasse residents should not fear more homes, people and car. He’s a master planner and has thought everything out, he said.

When it comes to sewerage, Waltemath said, “not only is there no negative impact to the Plaquemines system, but because of The Parks, Plaquemines is better off than before.”

Because there is no sewer line extending to the Parks area, Waltemath said he had two choices: create his own line or tap into New Orleans.

He negotiated an agreement with the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans to supply all sewer capacity to the Parks, putting it on an entirely separate system than Plaquemines.

“In addition, during the negotiation, we agreed in principle with the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans to supply an additional 3 million gallons per day for other developments in Plaquemines,” Waltemath announced. The agreement is now being formally finalized, he said.

He stressed that this will save Plaquemines millions of infrastructure dollars and will help not only the growth area of Belle Chasse but also existing areas south of the Plaquemines sewer plant.

Waltemath’s agreement with the S&WB of New Orleans also has a clause pertaining to water.

The Parks plans on buying excess capacity from the Plaquemines water plant, which Plaquemines can afford and will provide some income for the parish. But if that ever diminishes, Waltemath said his agreement with New Orleans includes a clause to buy water from them.

“The new agreement between Plaquemines and New Orleans will allow Plaquemines to tie into New Orleans water for emergencies, as in oil spills,” he noted, “and buy water in the future if needed, thus saving millions in future water plant upgrades.

“Sewerage and water is easy,” he continued. “We’re really bringing some positive things.”

Water was also addressed in the form of drainage.

“The Parks will have a positive effect on drainage all the way down to Belle Chasse Highway by providing a 300-foot drainage servitude for retention and to carry drainage to Planters (Canal) from other neighborhoods,” Waltemath said.

He also referred to the 300-foot servitude as a lake. It is one of the reasons his newest neighborhoods is called “The Parks.”

Green space was a major consideration in his design. There will be parks of course scattered, and Waltemath has also planned a trail that entwines itself in the community, a trail that is 75 to 100-feet wide throughout.

He also kept space between homes.

In Plaquemines, one can build 3.5 homes to every acre of land. This adds up to 260 units for the Park’s 76-acre phase one. But phase one only has 150 units designed.

Along with the unprocessed trails, the “low density creates more open space and less runoff to impact the drainage,” Waltemath said.

Traffic and maintenance should not give residents or the parish headaches.

Because of its location so close to Algiers, Waltemath expects Parks residents to use General DeGaulle, not Belle Chasse Highway, to exit Plaquemines. He also expects that the widening of Woodland should be complete by the time phase one is complete.

And parish maintenance is a non-issue as all streets will be private, “controlled and paid for by the association (of homeowners).”

Although The Parks has not broken ground yet, the association is already 28 homes strong.

“I’m selling lots to people who want to buy into this community,” Waltemath said, noting that his previous project and his own neighborhood of English Turn, has not sold a lot this year.

Plaquemines Parish is almost a gated community itself, Waltemath observed, with two bridges connecting the Westbank of the parish to the rest of the metro area.

“It’s a very safe parish,” said Waltemath of the low-crime rate and also listed the good schools, the low taxes and the proximity to New Orleans as pluses.

Waltemath said there is a lot of interest in his Villas. They are smaller homes designed for single professionals and empty-nesters, anyone who does not need a large home to accommodate a family.

But these properties are not are not a definite part of the community. The lots are smaller than the parish’s codes allow. They would have to go before the parish council for approval.

If the council does allow the smaller Villa lots, The Parks still has designed well under what the parish authorizes, leaving a lot of green space that gives the community its name.

“My philosophy is ‘Bring something better to the table,’” said Waltemath. And right now, better means Plaquemines Parish.