



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

English Turn backer has new project

750 homes on 400 acres planned

Friday, September 12, 2008

By Kate Moran

Business writer

Even as the foreclosure crisis interrupts new housing construction in many parts of the country, an Algiers developer has announced plans for an enormous new subdivision in Plaquemines Parish not far from the Intracoastal Waterway.

David Waltemath, the president of Classic Properties and the developer behind the tony English Turn subdivision, has assembled land for a project called the Parks of Plaquemines that will include 750 houses when it is complete a decade from now.

New subdivisions of this size, anchored by a pool and tennis courts and veined with walking trails, are something of a rarity on the south shore. Developers long ago claimed the large, uncut tracts needed for such projects, and there are not many places left for enterprising builders to go.

"I have been looking at this property for more than 10 years," Waltemath said this week. "There is almost no land available on the south shore for a development of this magnitude."

Plaquemines has at least one other subdivision in progress, but it is much smaller than Waltemath's project. Wesley Wyman, president of Wyman Construction, is developing the Idlewild Estates in the Jesuit Bend area with 41 houses. He said the subdivision is nearly complete.

Waltemath sees in Plaquemines many of the same attributes that lured homebuyers to St. Tammany Parish -- lower crime, better schools -- but without the grueling commute across the Causeway. He likes to note the subdivision is only nine miles from downtown New Orleans.

In January, he bought 110 acres on Woodland Highway that will give rise to the first homes in the subdivision. He has a contract to purchase an additional 300 acres from the Batt family, whose members include former New Orleans Councilman Jay Batt, for a total project acreage of 400.

Waltemath himself is not a home builder. He obtains permits, subdivides the land, arranges services such as water and sewer and then assembles a pool of builders who work with buyers to custom-design the houses. However, he maintains veto power over architectural styles he considers distasteful.

"No contemporary, Victorian or Spanish styles will be accepted," the project's Web site decrees.

Because the Plaquemines sewer system could not support the addition of 750 houses, Waltemath

took the unusual step of approaching the Sewerage & Water Board in New Orleans and obtaining permission to purchase some of the excess capacity at its Algiers lift station.

Parish President Billy Nungesser said his office collaborated with the developer to reduce the subdivision's impact on taxpayer-financed services. He said he asked Waltemath to incorporate ponds so as not to strain the parish's drainage and pumping capacity. The new subdivision also will be gated and have private streets that do not have to be maintained by the parish.

"I'm excited about the subdivision because it shows we can do development and help our parish grow in a smart way and not put a burden on existing services for the parish," Nungesser said.

The west bank experienced a scare last week in the form of Hurricane Gustav, but Waltemath maintains that the acreage off Woodland Highway is as safe a place to build as any in the metro area. The land's elevation makes it unnecessary for him to raise it with fill. He displays flood maps in his office that show the land is protected by two Mississippi River levees.

New-home construction has plunged in the past year in states such as California, Florida and Nevada, where exotic loans once helped place families in houses they could not truly afford. When those buyers began entering foreclosure in epidemic numbers, the market for new building was virtually desiccated.

The New Orleans area has resisted the real estate downturn better than many other markets, but the region has seen its share of overbuilding, particularly on the north shore. Jon Luther, executive vice president of the Home Builders Association of Greater New Orleans, said there is still a market here for new construction, provided the houses are priced competitively.

Waltemath, who also developed the Estates of Northpark in Covington and the Highlands of Santa Maria in Baton Rouge, believes he can weather a sluggish market by offering a product rich with amenities -- the walking trails interspersed with small parks, the playgrounds, the swimming pool and the dramatic gated entrance.

"People like new housing, and there is always demand for it even in a depressed market," Waltemath said.

.....

Kate Moran can be reached at kmoran@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3491.