

Real Estate *Showcase*

Picture Perfect:

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Planned Equestrian Communities Come of Age

When you think of a planned community do you immediately think of golf? Courses designed by Arnold Palmer? Tee-offs at 7:00 a.m.? Sand traps? Well, if you love horses, you'll want to investigate a new trend in developments: the planned community geared toward one of the five fastest growing sports in the United States today, horseback riding.

It's no wonder that developers are following the trend closely. According to a study authored by the Barent's Group, LLC for the American Horse Council, "The U.S. horse industry, including recreation, showing, racing and other segments, involves more than seven million participants and includes nearly two million horse owners. The industry as a whole has an annual impact on the U.S. economy of \$112 billion and supports 1.4 million full-time jobs with approximately \$1.9 million paid in taxes at each level. The median income of horse-owning families is around \$60,000 with 38% of households earning under \$50,000 and 21% over \$100,000."

"Horseback riding is the new golf," says Michael Donovan, co-founder of Equestrian Services LLC, provider of turnkey equestrian amenities for communities and resorts throughout the United States. "Golf has shown signs of stagnation and even decline in the participation of its core members (as reported by Ryan Ballengee in February 21, 2007, article, "Golf's Identity Crisis" on the website Sports Central.org and Mintel International Group Ltd. in April 2006)," says Donovan, "while participation in horseback riding continues to increase every year."

The fact is today's "baby boomers," even as they approach retirement, are not slowing down much. It just isn't in their vocabulary. Gone are the days of knitting and sharing stories on the front porch. If baby boomers aren't riding, hanging out at the barn, or hauling hay, they're walking the dog or exploring new hiking trails.

Dream Come True

"I don't know of anyone who doesn't have a childhood fantasy that involves horses," says Donovan. "Even people who have never ridden a horse a day in their lives once dreamed of being a cowboy, or riding out with Lewis and Clark, or better yet, galloping off into Sherwood Forest with Robin Hood. The well-planned

equestrian community is appealing to a lot of people for several different reasons and on many different levels.

"Many [equestrian community] residents have never ridden and don't even own a horse," says Donovan. "They buy for the pleasure of waking up to horses virtually in their back yard every morning. They just want to look out their windows and watch horses grazing in a grassy field. So, even though they are not riding, they are still very much engaged in living their dream."

For active equestrians, life doesn't get any better than a well-planned equestrian community. "Unlike golf," says Donovan, "the equestrian community is accessible to residents all the time. There is no special tee-off time. Unfortunately, most of the open space in a golf community is unusable unless, of course, you are playing golf. You can't very well walk your dog through the fairway in the middle of the day. In the equestrian community you can walk your dog, enjoy the trails, or ride your horse at any time of the day you please."

One of the nicest things about living in an equestrian community is being surrounded by like-minded people. If you've ever ridden down a suburban road and had a vehicle almost run you down, you'll love the planned community advantage. Most residents never have to ride on the road because trail access has been planned well, but if you choose to ride on the road, you'll be surrounded by drivers who know and understand horses. Sound perfect?

"It's a huge advantage to ride on a trail specifically designed for horses," says Donovan. "It's not enough to just throw in trails. We need good trails that provide a challenging and fun choice, but that don't require us to ride down steep banks in order to get anywhere. It's also nice to know you won't have to deal with ATVs or dirt bikes on the trails as well."

The Right Stuff

From a developer's standpoint, equestrian communities are a lucrative business. Strict zoning laws and restrictive covenants are more and more common. However, in many states horses are still considered an agricultural pursuit and therefore these developments usually fall within those parameters. "Many jurisdictions," says Donovan, "consider horses an agri-

cultural use and will approve development.”

On the other hand, many jurisdictions are far less likely to approve golf communities, which, by their very nature, dramatically change the texture and quality of the landscape. In fact, in the last few years, chemical pesticides and fertilizers used to maintain the greens have also come under fire. Equestrian communities provide a much more natural environment, working with the landscape in an environmentally and aesthetically pleasing way, benefiting the community as a whole.

One of the most notable equestrian developments today is the 1220-acre planned community backed by Olympians Karen and David O'Connor in Lake City, Florida, (under construction now) and designed by Equestrian Services LLC. This may well become the standard by which all other developments are judged.

Set amongst grandiose oak trees, O'Connor Signature At the Oaks boasts a 33-stall barn, a competition quality dressage arena, a hunter-jumper ring, a covered round pen, and a cross-country course designed by David O'Connor. Add to that over 15 miles of looped riding trails and you have an equestrian paradise like no other. Oh ... and let's not forget the annual clinics given by Karen and David O'Connor, expert instruction given by other clinicians from all around the world, and (lest old Spot feel left out) a charming and fun dog park. Check it all out at www.oconnortheoaks.com.

“We designed the trail system first,” says Michael Donovan of Equestrian Services LLC. “We wanted residents to enjoy the trails without having to ride along roads or shimmy down steep banks. There is no fun in riding 15 miles of trails that follow a road system or having to shimmy down a precipitous slope the size of the Grand Canyon. So the entire development is planned around the trail system. We made sure that every estate lot has individual trail access. Of course, this development is so large that some lots on the far outskirts are a two-hour hack to the main barn, so we even put in equestrian ‘parks’ with local arenas as well.”

It is crystal clear that there is both a wrong way and a right way to build and design an equestrian community. “It is imperative,” says Donovan, “that every detail is thought out before breaking ground.” The O'Connor Signature at the Oaks community even has a quarantine barn for incoming horses. With the recent EHV-1 outbreak, this kind of planning is much appreciated. Equine professionals run, maintain and manage the main barn so that horses remain safe, healthy and happy.

“The goal in designing an equestrian community,” says Donovan, “is to make sure the experience always lives up to the dream. Everyone needs to be happy – the developers, the residents, and, of course, the horses.”

“When looking for an equestrian community,” says Donovan, “try to narrow your choices to five or ten you'd like to investigate further. Make sure you choose facilities that appeal to the discipline you're invested in. Just like choosing a boarding facility, you'll want to pick a development that caters to your interests. If your interest lies in barrel racing, you may not be all that happy in a development focused on dressage.”

Next, make some phone calls. Talk to the sales office. Ask hard, detailed questions. “In an equestrian development it is so critical that every minute detail has been thought through to the end,” says Donovan. “Site planning, pasture-to-horse ratio, footing, fencing, every detail ... right down to stall hardware. This is not Field of Dreams ... this isn't ‘just build it and they will come’. This is planning every step of the way.”

“Who will be caring for your horses?” asks Donovan. “A typical boarding facility has money as its

prime motivation. After all, if it doesn't make money, it folds. In an equestrian development, the motivation is different ... or should be. The barn serves the residents, not the other way around. You'll want to know how much it will ultimately cost you to maintain the facilities. If it's beyond your pocketbook you won't be happy for long.

“Developers are raising the bar on barn management,” continues Donovan. “The planned community should offer trained and accredited professional barn staff who live on site. If the indoor arena is spectacular, but you can't [use it] due to a busy lesson program, what good is it? So, find out who is running the barn, what their credentials are, and what their agenda may be. If there are individuals making money on it, chances are, this barn won't serve the residents the way it should. Remember, if the barn management does not meet your expectations, the property is valueless.”

When you narrow your search to two or three communities, go and look at them in person. Walk the trails, talk to the residents, visit the barn. No developer can build a facility that will please everyone. That is just impossible. Find the property that works for you.

If you'd like to learn more about Equestrian Services L.L.C. visit www.eqsv.com. ■