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The Region

Creatures Comforts

*Luxury-Home Developers Are Luring Buyers With a Four-Legged Perk.
Hint: It's Not a Claw-Footed Tub.*

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Developers across the Washington region are building extravagant equestrian centers in their subdivisions to lure buyers of luxury homes in the hope that horses are the new golf.

Three developments with horse centers are being built in the suburbs, which could double the number of area equestrian sites that are combined with residential communities.

The builders are attracting such buyers as American University associate professor Rick Gibson, who never knew much about horses except that his daughter was enchanted by them.

She started riding at age 5. At 7, she petitioned her family's Laurel homeowners association to allow her to keep a horse; the association refused. Now she's 10, and her parents drive her to a stable 10 miles away in Columbia each week for lessons.

But unlike most young girls who dream of one day owning horses, Sarah could see her equestrian fantasies fulfilled next year when her family moves to Marlboro Ridge, a new community in Upper Marlboro with luxury townhouses, single-family homes — and its own equestrian center.

In recent years, some builders across the country have been banking on affluent home buyers' trading in their golf clubs for — or at least supplementing them with — saddles. Developers in the Washington suburbs are joining in.

Toll Brothers Inc. has sold more than 50 of the 1,058 homes and townhouses that eventually will be built at Marlboro Ridge.



BY TRACY A. WOODWARD — THE WASHINGTON POST

Tammy Beardsley watches her daughter Jenna, 8, as she takes a horseback-riding lesson at the Clairvaux Equestrian Center, part of the Beacon Hill community in Leesburg.

Two similar communities are being planned for Loudoun County, where polo, fox hunting and other equestrian activities have long been associated with the gentry in and around the quaint town of Middleburg.

Loudoun already has at least one subdivision with an equestrian theme, the Beacon Hill neighborhood in Leesburg, where homes in eyeshot of the Clairvaux stables can be had for \$1.5 million to \$2 million. Chesapeake Ranch Estates, a large planned community in Lusby in Southern Maryland, offers stables in addition to a private airport.

"It's gotten to the point where developers are asking themselves, 'Well, what can we add to make us attractive and differ-

ent?' " said Damon DeVito, managing director of Affinity Golf Management, a Charlottesville company that manages clubhouses and golf courses in luxury communities and resorts. "When you look at it that way, equestrian becomes a very interesting option."

Horseback riding is among the fastest-growing sports in the country, said Jennifer Donovan, co-founder of Equestrian Services, the company designing the equestrian center at Marlboro Ridge, as well as several other communities across the country. The firm promotes equestrian sports by connecting its projects with celebrity riders in the way golf courses boast the Jack Nicklaus or Arnold

Palmer brand.

Horses also have an appeal for home buyers who have no interest in riding them, Donovan said.

“People want to feel like they have a connection to the earth, to nature and animals,” Donovan said. “Many of these people may not ever touch the horses or ride them, but just to see them grazing brings them pleasure.”

That’s not so different from golf. Only 25 to 40 percent of residents of golf course communities actually swing a club, DeVito said, with the rest content to enjoy the view and the amenities available at the clubhouse.

Dean Makarita, 46, a real estate agent who bought a house in Beacon Hill in February, said it was the equestrian center that clinched it. Now, he goes to the barn about three times a week to take his dapple-gray thoroughbred, Bella, out for a ride on the horse trails that wind through the neighborhood.

“It’s great exercise,” Makarita said. “After you’ve gone riding, you can feel that just about every muscle in your body was used.”

Creighton Farms, a gated community being developed in Loudoun near Aldie in conjunction with Ritz-Carlton, will have an equestrian center and a Nicklaus-designed golf course.

And the developer of Fieldstone Farm, a community going up just outside Purcellville, is finalizing an agreement with Equestrian Services to offer a center where residents may opt for “red-carpet services” for their horses, including daily exercise, hand baths and “pampering,” Donovan said.



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Horse-loving residents of Beacon Hill can take a short stroll to the community’s equestrian center. Shown are Terri Young, the center’s owner, and student Ashley Risinger, 7.

The equestrian center “is a little more in keeping with the feel of the area” than golf, said Marty Mitchell, vice president of land and business development for Mitchell & Best. Besides, he added, “there are plenty of golf course opportunities within a half-hour’s drive in that area.”

The company has sold three new homes at Fieldstone Farm, with as many as 130 eventually going up in the 800-acre community.

Toll Brothers hopes to begin moving people into Marlboro Ridge next summer, when an equestrian center also is scheduled to open.

“I’d heard of golf communities, but I’d never heard of equestrian communities,” said Gibson, 53, whose home overlooking the paddocks will cost about \$800,000. “Any parent wants to help a child with her

dream, so this was a godsend.”

The Gibsons had decided months ago that they wanted to buy a house where their daughter could have a horse. They considered settling on a few acres in rural Virginia but worried that it was too isolated.

Then they heard about Marlboro Ridge, which sits just outside the Capital Beltway and will eventually include miles of horse-riding and hiking trails. They decided to get in early to get a house close to the barns, so Sarah could look out the family room window to see the occupants placidly munching on grass.

Rick Gibson said the family is hoping to have some money to buy a horse for Sarah.

Until then, he said, “at the very least she can walk to her lessons and see the horses more often than when we can drive her to the barn.”