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Ave Maria project sets precedent for conservation

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Farm fields cover the landscape and wildlife still roves through old crops. The 15,000 acres rest in the middle of nowhere along a two-lane road that eventually leads to the small farming village of Immokalee.

This far-flung section of Collier County was never a place folks were anxious to live or businessmen were eager to venture.

But now even government leaders and environmental advocates in Tallahassee and around the country are watching it closely.

Ave Maria University and Ave Maria the town will be built on almost 5,000 of those acres off Oil Well Road in the eastern part of the county, a project made possible through a dynamic partnership formed by Barron Collier Cos. and Domino's Pizza founder/Ave Maria creator Tom Monaghan.

Though Florida is a magnet for development, this project sticks out from the rest because it's the first to take advantage of a 3-year-old state law that encourages both development and preservation of land.

Ave Maria is quickly becoming a project that planners, developers and environmentalists say will be looked upon years from now as the first successful user of Florida's rural land stewardship program.

"People will look back a decade from now, and we'll have protected a million acres of land based on this model," said Eric Draper, policy director for Audubon of Florida. "And we'll say, 'It all started right there in Immokalee.'"



For years, developers and environmentalists in Florida have tried to come up with a way to prevent urban sprawl and protect rural land values.

Ave Maria, Draper said, finally broke the code.

The Audubon of Florida agrees with the concept of self-contained, village-type developments surrounded by natural resources.

Ave Maria University, the first Roman Catholic university to be built in the United States in more than 40 years, will draw growth to an area that now has no central feature besides agriculture. That growth will fill Ave Maria the town.

Monaghan has compared AMU to prestigious schools such as Notre Dame. He has plans to build campus-related academic, administration and recreation facilities. There will be chapels, athletic complexes, sporting events, student housing and a golf course.

The town will offer 11,000 residential units ranging from condominiums to luxury homes. More than 700 low-income units will be available.

There will be 690,000 square feet of retail space, 400 hotel rooms, 35,000 square feet of medical facilities, parks and public schools. AMU will provide a high school and a private school for grades kindergarten through eighth grade.

The idea is to provide necessities, such as grocery stores, medical clinics, churches, libraries and schools, so those who live in the development will rarely have to leave, causing less traffic congestion in eastern Collier County.

But the idea also includes preserving the land that will surround the community.

The Collier County Commission adopted the rural land stewardship program into the county's comprehensive plan in October 2002 and, shortly after, Ave Maria and Barron Collier Co. officials announced its partnership and plan for development by way of the rural growth plan.

The plan allows landowners to voluntarily give up development rights in natural areas in exchange for credits that could be used to build on less sensitive land.

The two groups will need 28,402 stewardship credits to develop the land.

The plan entices developers to join because Craig Evans, president of Stewardship America Inc., said housing developments or businesses surrounded by natural resources have higher market values.

Stewardship America is a nonprofit group based in Boca Raton that encourages and helps create land-use policies that control sprawl, promote rural economic development and enhance environmental protection across the country.

Evans calls the rural land stewardship program a revolutionary growth management plan that brings modern planning to rural areas without destroying rural character.

"There is a lot of attention focused on Florida," he said. "It's seen to many as (using) the most effective tool to deal with growth pressures."

Evans, who travels throughout the country to work with state officials on how to plan for rural areas, said states including California, Virginia, Texas and North Carolina are considering creating growth plans similar to Florida's guidelines.

Draper said representatives from the Audubon of Florida were recently in St. Lucie County promoting Ave Maria's strategy as a way to preserve farmland, and Evans said he knows of four other projects in the state gradually following in the footsteps of Ave Maria.

Chuck Littlejohn, who is involved in growth management work with Littlejohn, Mann and Associates in Tallahassee, a government consulting firm, said organizations in Tallahassee interested in a proactive approach to planning are monitoring rural growth plan legislation and the Ave Maria development.

Although construction hasn't yet started, Littlejohn calls Ave Maria a success story because it's the first project to take advantage of the rural land stewardship program and, so far, the project that is expected to attract more than 20,000 people has met with few roadblocks and much praise.

"We're very pleased with the way it's been implemented in Collier County," Littlejohn said. "There are a lot of local governments looking at it elsewhere in the state."



Those monitoring the Ave Maria project may have expected the first phase of the development to be complete in 2006, but that date has now changed to 2007.

One reason for the timeline change is the grueling process of obtaining the permits.

Applications for construction bids have already been sent and returned to Barron Collier Cos., but no one has been granted projects because a start date still hasn't been set. Construction can't start until the environmental permits are granted from the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Tom Sansbury, director of community services for landowner Barron Collier Cos., said officials have initial permits from the South Florida Water Management District, but they're still waiting for federal permits, as well as state-level permits.

Then there are the two applications the groups submitted this year.

The first was the Development of Regional Impact, or DRI. The DRI application covers everything from garbage collection to the number of retirees expected to live in the town.

It's up to the state Department of Community Affairs to give final approval of the plans, but the state asks for the county's recommendation as well. The detailed plans will be presented during two public hearings: One will be held before the county planning commission and the other before county commissioners sometime next year.

The other application is the Stewardship Receiving Area Designation application, which was submitted to the county last week. It gave the public its first glimpse of the layout of the town and university, and will likely be approved during the summer of 2005.

Another reason for the one-year project delay is the demand for and the cost of concrete, steel and laborers.

AMU President Nick Healy said the cost of construction has increased the past year, as has the cost of concrete and steel. Both are in high demand throughout the world, Healy said, and he doesn't expect that to change anytime soon.

He said laborers are also more scarce than usual because many are repairing homes and businesses damaged by the hurricanes this past summer.

Healy added that Monaghan's financial commitment has remained the same. The first phase is expected to cost more than \$200 million.

The cement, steel and labor issues have forced the developer and Monaghan to cut sections of phase one and, instead, throw them into phase two.

Eliminated from the first phase was the construction of the administration building, a dormitory for graduate students and one academic building.

Healy said once the permanent campus is open, it will serve a total of 6,000 students — graduates and undergraduates. The AMU interim campus in North Naples has an estimated 300 students.

If Ave Maria succeeds, it will encourage other developers to follow suit and millions of acres could be preserved.

"Immokalee is going to be one of the most sought-after places in Florida 10 or 20 years from now," Healy said. "You can just sense Immokalee is on the cusp of enormous change. It's going to be transformed."

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