

2004 To Be Preview of Housing Boom Ahead

By Jason Harvey
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West Chatham County real estate professionals say 2004 will begin to offer a glimpse of the astonishing amount of homes planned for the "I-95 Corridor" in the next decade.

Several new residential communities will start construction phases this year, and established developments will sell around 120 homes on average this year, say local real estate experts.

To date, developers have received approval to build nearly 22,000 housing units on 6,500 acres throughout the corridor, according to a density study by Gilbert Realty. More than 1,100 of those homes have already been built, said the study.

Local and national developers have invested millions of dollars in the I-95 Corridor, which stretches north to the 4,500 units planned for 1,340 acres at Rice Hope Plantation in Port Wentworth, and south just past Interstate 16 to the 3,760 units planned for 1,700 acres at Savannah Quarters. It's all in an effort to make West Chatham the next booming residential growth area along the Atlantic coast.

Developers say the effort is working: Planning and permitting is primarily complete for the corridor, transportation and utility infrastructure is steadily advancing, and home construction and selling is on a rapid pace.

"We've got this (density) gap that's being filled in along the East Coast," said Jack Wardlaw, VP of Jerry C. Wardlaw Construction of Savannah, who's involved in the corridor as a developer and builder.

In fact, Wardlaw and his partners exist as the largest landowners in the I-95 Corridor, owning around 2,000 acres in Godley Station. Wardlaw has teamed with his brother, Jerry Wardlaw, and Steve Hall of Hallmark Homes, to form North Godley Developers, which is developing North Godley. And Wardlaw has partnered with those three businessmen and Ernest Williams of Ernest Homes to form Godley Station Development Group, which is developing South Godley.

"People and businesses are looking to get away from big cities," said Wardlaw, who now expects build-out to occur in about six years instead of the previously envisioned 10 for the residential projects

directed by his development companies.

Wardlaw said the I-95 Corridor does not have a typical homebuyer, with clients including retirees, divorcees, first-and-second time buyers, re-locaters and others.

Interestingly, Wardlaw said there's demand coming from the city limits of Savannah, with urban residents wanting to move to the suburbs. The trend in the past decade has been for Savannah residents to move to Bryan and Effingham counties for suburban life, but now those people are choosing west Chatham, Wardlaw said.

"The ease of movement is so much better here than on the Southside or on the Islands. You can get to work without the hassle," Wardlaw said.

The Villages at Godley Station, situated on 775 acres in Godley South, has received approval for 1,000 housing units. Wardlaw said it only took two years to build and sell all of the 270 homes in the 130-acre Copper Village community inside The Villages At Godley Station.

Wardlaw is currently having success developing 300 acres at The Arbors, which is approved for 600 single-family homes. Builders started construction at Godley South in November 2002. Since then, nearly 200 homes have been sold ranging from \$130,000-\$250,000.

"This is the fastest selling development in the area," said Wardlaw, who noted The Arbors should sell another 200 homes in 2004.

Wardlaw and his partners are also developing 360 acres at Forest Lakes, an upscale development in Godley South that's been approved for 389 single-family lots. Builders have already begun construction on 68 lots, which average an acre in size and are surrounded by woods and lagoon.

Developers also plan about 150 town-



A model of a home Jerry C. Wardlaw Construction will soon build in North Godley Station's The Highlands.

homes for Forest Lakes, as well as a number of apartments. Builders at Forest Lakes include Hallmark Homes, Ernest Homes, Wardlaw Construction and EC Johns.

"This is comparable to Southbridge, but it's gated," said Wardlaw, pointing out homes at Forest Lakes would sell for \$300,000-\$500,000.

West Chatham developers and builders said that homes would soon pop up in North Godley, now that the necessary transportation and utility infrastructure is being put in.

North Godley's 1,300-acre development, The Highlands, has received approval for construction of 4,700 single-family homes and 1,200 multi-family units, Wardlaw said. Five large parcels have been sold to builders, and the construction companies have plans to move forward in 2004, he said.

Rick Fitzer of Genesis Homes has bought parcels C, F and I totaling 200 acres, and D.R. Horton has bought parcels G and H totaling 200 acres. Both companies intend to build single-family homes.

Wardlaw said Jerry C. Wardlaw Construction would build single-family homes on parcel K totaling 240 acres. And he said parcel D totaling 60 acres has been donated to the Chatham County-Savannah Public School System.

The school district must build an elementary or middle school, or both, within the next five years or forfeit ownership to the North Godley Developers.

The Highlands phase one will start this year, which includes 2,000 housing units. "That's why the school made so much sense right there," Wardlaw said. ❖