

# New 'towns' pop up on rural land around Florida

[Gabe Stern](#), Naples Daily News Published 6:00 a.m. ET Aug. 30, 2019 | Updated 11:51 a.m. ET Aug. 30, 2019

Ave Maria brewery owner gives insight to working and living in the rural town Andrew West, News-Press

Danee Williams traded her car in for a golf cart once she knew she was settled in her Collier County community.

She had moved to Ave Maria in 2015, and since then, things had moved quickly: houses were sprouting up, a Publix had set up shop, her husband Matthew had gotten a job at the Arthrex plant in town. Then she opened Oil Well Craft Beer in 2017, one of the first bars in town.

She used to drive to Naples for groceries or Immokalee for the Farmers Market, but lately she had used the resources by her doorstep as more businesses started to open. When the choice came between a new car and a golf cart, she came to a realization.

“We don’t have to leave.” She chose a golf cart.



Danee Williams and her husband own Oil Well Craft Brewery in the town of Ave Maria. They both live and work in the young town. She loves the small town for its safety and camaraderie among residents. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

It’s been a result of Barron Collier Companies “Field of Dreams” approach to attract residents to this inland community and give them little reason to leave. While many of their residents commute to Naples or Fort Lauderdale for work, developers behind the master-planned community have made an effort to make this quaint town, built around a Catholic church and university, its own. They’re still adding commercial and recreational space, trying to pull residents like Williams in.

“Once you really start to get pieces in place, things start to happen quicker,” said Brian Goguen, a main developer of Ave Maria and COO of Barron Collier Cos. “They start to accelerate.”

Developers like Barron Collier are embarking on a trend that’s become widespread throughout the state. Away from Florida’s coveted beaches and coastal cities, more than a dozen master-planned communities are looking to turn old farmland and pastures into their own multi-generational communities; stoking questions about development, conservation and how the two should intersect.



Danee Williams and her husband own Oil Well Craft Brewery in the town of Ave Maria. They both live and work in the young town. She loves the small town for its safety and camaraderie among residents. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

Communities such as Babcock Ranch on the Lee-Charlotte County line, Lakewood Ranch between Sarasota and Bradenton, Westlake in Palm Beach County, and many others have the same goals: Condense living, commercial and recreational space within their own boundaries. Build communities that may be close to the coast but don't rely on beaches to sell homes. Provide amenities to ensure an active lifestyle.

What makes them different from some past massive developments, such as Cape Coral and Lehigh Acres, is that they are pre-planned with space for schools, churches, town centers and shopping plazas. Cape Coral, one of Florida's largest cities, still struggles with not having enough commercial space.

This comes at a crucial time for Florida's growth. In the next 50 years, the state's population of 21.6 million is expected to increase by about 12 million people, according to an analysis conducted by the University of Florida and non-profit 1000 Friends of Florida.

Even if these master-planned developments are condensed, Florida's developed land will jump from 18.17% to 28.30% of the state's landscape between 2010 and 2070 — an increase in 3.5 million acres, per the study.

If these predictions hold true, then nearly all of Florida's landscape will be defined in the next 50 years. And with a new highway system proposed to cut through the central spine of the state, many experts and developers agree: whether these developments truly become self-sustaining has large implications on the state's future landscape.



Work progresses on houses at the town of Babcock Ranch on Tuesday August, 6, 2019. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

“There’s a lot of fingers crossed that this is done right,” said Brad Cornell, policy director at Audubon Florida and Audubon of the Western Everglades. “Because this is the last chance to do something.”

It’s been 15 years since Tom Monaghan, founder and CEO of Domino’s Pizza, approached Barron Collier Cos. with a proposition: he wanted to build a Catholic university on their land, with a church to go along with it. Barron Collier, with its 80,000 acres of property in east Collier County, became enticed to build a community around it. The community is open to all faiths.

The two agreed to partner. Monaghan helped build a \$30 million church and became chancellor of Ave Maria University. Barron Collier then built a town center to attract homebuilders, shops to entice residents, and the first residents trickled in. It was part of their long-term plan for Collier County, Goguen said, where developments shift east. Ave Maria became the first.



Visitors enter the oratory in the town of Ave Maria on Wednesday August 7, 2019. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

“Our company, if we’re successful in Ave Maria, we’re going to be involved in a number of those future projects,” said Goguen.

The “Field of Dreams” approach is still in the works today. The company and its partners are selling about 250 homes per year. Ave Maria Development LLP (a combination of Monaghan and Barron Collier Cos.) identified an area where additional commercial space can accommodate a growing population. It’s where Williams started Oil Well Craft Beer, and where construction is ongoing to build more space.

But unlike past developments — namely Lehigh Acres, Golden Gate Estates and Cape Coral to the west — Ave Maria Development LLP planned how they could blend commercial space with residential space, and effort to keep their residents on the land. The developers built shops around the Catholic church. They’re trying to expand on the 4,000 acres — not counting the university — that make up the town. Already there is a golf course and a water park.



Phong Ho owns the Tropical Smoothie in the town of Ave Maria. He works and lives in the young town. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

They're not building just for the 2,000 homes that have been built, but for the 11,000 homes expected by the time it's finished.

Still, environmentalists are wary — particularly as a result of Florida's development patterns in the 1960s. A major question that they have: What will be the impact of these developments?

"I think we are racing forward in Florida with a development pattern without asking basic questions like we've been trying to ask for a generation," said Thomas Hawkins, director of University of Florida's Department of Urban and Regional Planning. "And it's a bold experiment. And we don't know what the impacts are going to be."

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Private developers built homes in Florida before, and you can see some of them from space.

Satellite images show the grid-lined streets that make up Golden Gate Estates, an attempt in the 1960s to sell to northerners looking to move south. To this day, Golden Gate Estates hasn't built out.

Once advertised as having tremendous investment potential and a chance to live in paradise, some Florida developments ended up failing, with some being scams — lots were dug into partially developed swampland, houses were sold on streets that were hastily made and commercial space wasn't thought of for many of these.

Now, the state is looking to preserve what was developed. The Picayune Strand Restoration Project will plug 48 miles of canals and remove 260 miles of roads in the southern portion of Golden Gate Estates.

From many of these sub-plotted communities, the state learned lessons on how to develop in the future:

"The answer to the sustainability question isn't to do as much with what's in the town as where you put it and how much space it takes," Cornell said. "So if you put it in the wrong place, if you put it in the middle of a wetland flow-way — that's what Cape Coral, Golden Gate estates and Lehigh Acres were," Cornell said. "They cared nothing about what was in that landscape."

And it wasn't just Southwest Florida. There were 150 pre-plotted subdivisions across Florida built around the mid-20th century.

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Today's bigger communities tend to be better financed and better planned, experts say.

In 2013, Minto Communities USA came across a patch of orange groves stretching 6 square miles in Palm Beach County. The company bought the 3,800 acres.

**ICYMI:** [Florida citrus crop value up as farmland shrinks](#)



Work progresses on houses at the town of Babcock Ranch on Tuesday August, 6, 2019. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

Minto's property is surrounded by 30 square miles of residential, grid-lined streets. Sub-platted communities rich with residential space, and missing commercial and recreational space for the residents in that area.

John Carter, vice president of Minto Communities USA, based in Coconut Creek Florida, saw an opportunity: not only could a development become self-contained, but it could act as the downtown of central Palm Beach County. It could fill the gaps in what the area lacked: healthcare services, office centers and retail space. Carter says Minto's building "the new downtown of Central Palm Beach County." But for now, it's still developing.

Babcock Ranch developer speaks to the future of the sustainable town Andrew West, News-Press

The developers spent four years planning the community after they bought it, building a downtown first and then attracted homebuilders, then residents.

Now, 350 houses into their goal of 4,500 residential units, they have an emergency medical facility, they've broken ground on their \$15 million amenities project meant to house a concert pavilion, picnic areas and a bicycle jump park. They've brought in a 360,000 gallon resort-style pool. They're building solar energy center.



Work progresses on houses at the town of Babcock Ranch on Tuesday August, 6, 2019. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

It's a lifestyle that they want to brand as their own, an identity that the platted residential units lacked, Carter said. For now, Carter said it's "being translated from a vision on paper to something you can physically see."

But wary of Florida's past development mistakes, and with a different set of regulations, the concept still worries some experts.

**'The world needs more people like them': [Professionals recognized at Outstanding Hospitality Service Awards](#)**

Ruth Steiner, a professor in the University of Florida College of Design, Construction and Planning, said despite the large land holdings that developers have, the amount of land being developed in Florida is alarming. In the next 30 to 50 years — even with Florida's projected population growth — the amount of development exceeds that demand, Steiner said.



Francisco Oxlaj plants foliage at a new home at the town of Babcock Ranch on Tuesday August, 6, 2019. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

"it's sort of a dilemma for the state because so much of the state's economy is dependent on development," she said.

And at the quick rate of land that's being developed, it makes way for unprecedented planning for the future.

But as more and more land gets designated for development, more land is being preserved, too. The amount of preserved land will increase by 6.25 million acres, the Florida 2070 Study says.



The roof of a new home is about to be installed in the town of Ave Maria. The oratory is in the background. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

Several counties have land protection programs, geared toward protecting higher-value wildlife grounds as developers build on fill the gaps between major cities.

**ICYMI:** [FWC captures another Burmese python measuring nearly 18-foot-long](#)

Minto Properties was intent on buying the land that is now Westlake because there were few swaths of land that were neither developed nor protected under Palm Beach County's "Ag reserve" designation, Carter said. Minto touts Westlake on its website as "More than a community. Florida's new city."



Phong Ho owns the Tropical Smoothie in the town of Ave Maria. He works and lives in the young town. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

Across the state, several counties have their own regulations on development.

In Collier County, before Ave Maria Development LLP could build the church and university, it had to set aside 17,000 acres of Barron Collier Cos. property to be preserved. They developed on 5,000 acres.

Raised over concerns of what happened with Golden Gate Estates, Collier County and the state in 1999 agreed to a Rural Lands Stewardship Area, a voluntary program designed to help preserve environmental and farming areas while also allowing for smart growth development.



Visitors enter the oratory in the town of Ave Maria on Wednesday August 7, 2019. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

When Ave Maria developed on 5,000 acres, the developers also set aside 17,000 acres near it for conservation.

As developers continue to dig into rural county land — particularly the Rivergrass development east of Golden Gate Estates — more and more land will be preserved as well.

For Cornell, it boils down to a simple question.

“Have we learned any lessons in the history of Florida and how we build our human communities?” he said posing the hypothetical question “Can we do this better?”

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In the tug-of-war between developing and conserving, Syd Kitson, CEO of Kitson & Partners, is attempting to balance the two.

In many ways, Babcock Ranch is an offshoot of Syd Kitson’s days hiking in upstate New York. He’s building what he says will be the first sustainable city in the country.

“Preservation and development could work hand in hand,” he said, and for the past decade he’s attempted to prove that.





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Originally he had 91,000 acres of land, but sold 80% of it to the state for \$350 million for a massive preserve. He's also preserving half of the remaining 18,000 acres. Ten percent of his original purchase (9,000 acres) will be used to develop an alternative to coastal living, a "front porch lifestyle" that includes solar energy, lakefront homes and autonomous vehicles.



Black bellied-whistling ducks fly over the solar field next to Babcock Ranch on Tuesday August, 6, 2019. The solar field powers Babcock Ranch. The electricity that is not used goes into the grid for consumption elsewhere. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

"We're want the kind of person who is looking for a place that they remember from when they were growing up," Kitson said, "but with all the modern technologies of today."

It's made tracks since he waited out the Great Recession: He installed 400 acres of solar panels. He sold 500 homes. The Ranch's utilities are independent, along with their waste management system. He put in a charter school, and now plans on bringing in 300,000 to 400,000 square feet of commercial that will be built over the next two years. (He says he's in negotiations with major companies, but has not announced what these are).

They're attempting to recruit companies for which their residents could work, build houses for the employees to live in, and amenities to keep them on the ranch during their free time. Once more companies come to Babcock Ranch, he's anticipating a snowball effect, similar to what Ave Maria has now: where companies settle, and their employees soon follow. Still, that's a work in progress.



Black bellied-whistling ducks fly over the solar field next to Babcock Ranch on Tuesday August, 6, 2019. The solar field powers Babcock Ranch. The electricity that is not used goes into the grid for consumption elsewhere. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

But even Kitson, who says Babcock Ranch will be a “hub”, knows that he can’t control the future. A “black swan” may be out there, he said: the mounting debt of the U.S. may come back to bite down the line, and other geopolitical factors could affect his development.

“It has nothing to do necessarily with Southwest Florida, but on a more global scale there’s always something lurking out there,” Kitson said. “It’s the unknown that keeps me up at night.”

And the steady influx of new residents brings more questions and challenges.

“There’s people coming to Florida. What are we going to do with them?” said Cornell. “How are we going to accommodate them and not mess up the beauty of the place they’re coming down here for?”



Birds perch on the solar field next to Babcock Ranch on Tuesday August, 6, 2019. The solar field powers Babcock Ranch. The electricity that is not used goes into the grid for consumption elsewhere. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)