

Development Casts Cloud On Country Scene

By KEVIN WIATROWSKI The Tampa Tribune

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SAN ANTONIO - Margo McConnell raises miniature donkeys on 10 acres she calls Grand Vista Ranch.

That vista expands from McConnell's backyard, which looks out onto King Lake and the rolling, tree-covered landscape of Epperson Ranch.

The lake is broad and shallow. Fed only by rainwater, it attracts a shifting population of wading birds that feed at its edges and nest nearby the trees. A family of bald eagles nests in a pine tree on the east side of the lake.

The lake also hosts a private fish camp - the members continuing a tradition at King Lake that began thousands of years ago, as shown by the prehistoric canoe found on the lake bottom during a period of low water in 2001. Subsequent research in 2003 turned up sites where ancient Floridians made arrowheads and built fires on the lake's shore.

"This is a beautiful place to live," said Arnold Becken, who has lived in a mobile home on 10 acres next to the McConnells since the early 1980s.

Lately, a cloud has passed over the bucolic scene as Miami-based developer Lennar Corp. moves ahead with plans to turn Epperson Ranch into a suburban-style mix of homes, schools and shops.

Lennar is just the latest developer to stake a claim to the land surrounding King Lake. To the north, developers have begun work on the Bella Verde golf resort, formerly Cannon Ranch. To the northwest, plans are moving ahead to build Pasco Town Center, a major retail complex between Interstate 75 and McKendree Road.

County commissioners, sitting as the Local Planning Agency, met Tuesday in Dade City to discuss the land change needed to develop Epperson Ranch but put off a decision until County Administrator John Gallagher can work out a final deal with Lennar regarding impact fees and construction deadlines.

Protection Zone Created

McConnell and her neighbors on Kenton Road live within the shelter of a Rural Neighborhood Protection Area created by county commissioners last year.

The protections cover the Quail Hollow section of Wesley Chapel and extend across the interstate to Kenton Road.

They end in the middle of King Lake where the Kenton Road homeowners abut Epperson Ranch.

The protection zone is intended to make it difficult for suburbia to take hold within it. But that could change if county officials succeed in getting federal highway officials to approve a new interchange at I-75 and Overpass Road, said Sam Steffey, the county's growth management director.

A new interchange would break up the protection area, leaving Kenton Road surrounded by development, Steffey said. "They'd become the hole in the doughnut, so to speak," he said.

For now, McConnell and her neighbors on the western shore of King Lake are torn by plans to turn the Epperson's 1,700-acre homestead - and east side of the lake - into another outpost of suburbia.

"While you welcome part of it, you're scared of part of it," said Angela Kahn, who has lived on King Lake 17 years and raises cattle on her property.

On the one hand, Kenton Road residents are intrigued by the prospect of a grocery store and other shopping planned for a new town center a few miles away on Curley Road. That commercial hub will be shared by Epperson Ranch and Watergrass, a development rising on the east side of Curley.

On the other hand, they aren't eager to trade their King Lake vista for row upon row of rooftops. They worry that Lennar Corp.'s plans for the Epperson land will pollute the lake with runoff, litter their land with wind-blown trash and disrupt the peace with roaring boat motors.

"We're concerned but we're not angry, if that makes any sense," Margo McConnell said.

With the development on its way to being a reality, McConnell and her half dozen allies hope to alleviate the project's potential impact on their lives. Among other things, they are hoping to get the county or the builder to restrict access to the lake and the kind of boat

motors allowed.

Neighbors, Lennar To Meet

The Kenton Road neighbors will meet today with Lennar officials to talk about the company's plans for Epperson Ranch. Those show a single T-shaped boat dock on the lake's southeast corner. Company officials have said they favor human-powered canoes and kayaks on the lake and intend to limit motorized boats to 10 horsepower - precluding Jet Skis-type craft.

However, McConnell said Lennar's pending deal with the county allows multiple access points while banning a paved ramp. She hopes the company will change that plan.

Lennar also has designated hundreds of acres of wetlands around the lake as conservation area, prohibiting development there. It's unclear whether that means homes built on Epperson Ranch will be invisible from Kenton Road.

Becken is convinced the development will change his way of life. "What we're going to see is a subdivision with streetlights," he said.

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