

Memphis Daily News - Real Estate & Development
Focus: 200-Lot Subdivision Gives Hernando 'Something Different'

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For 32 years, Richie Burnette has lived in Hernando and watched DeSoto County rise from a sleepy country community to a thriving metropolitan suburb.

More than that, as owner of the development firm The Burnette Co., this lifelong Northwest Mississippian helped pave the way for DeSoto to become the fastest-growing community in the Mid-South and one of the fastest in the nation.

Burnette's latest project is unlike any other in his wide-ranging portfolio. Jefferson Group LLC, the entity he formed with partners Rip Walker, Pat Davis and Roy Holmes, is bringing a different kind of subdivision to Hernando, one that will blend traditional and modern.

The developers hope that formula will combat a soft residential housing market that's halted much speculative development and crumbled many builders in the past six months.

Key location

Jefferson is a 200-lot subdivision in Hernando designed by Memphis-based Looney Ricks Kiss Architects Inc. The first phase, slated to have 66 lots, is under way with the model home completed and five spec homes being constructed.

Following Traditional Neighborhood Development design guidelines, Jefferson will combine custom-built homes with ample green space, including walking trails and a lake.

"We kind of felt like DeSoto County was ready for something different," Burnette said. "People that are looking for the traditional product as well as the small-town flavor of Hernando - the Court Square and things like that - they're not going to find it anywhere else in DeSoto County. You want something, particularly in a market like this, to set you apart from others."

The Jefferson Group began developing this 100-acre property a couple years ago, and the partners decided they didn't want to put up the typical subdivision in light of other developments going up in the area. This consideration was heightened by their fear of a housing downturn, which did occur in the latter half of 2007.

Homes at Jefferson (www.jeffersonliving.com) will start in the \$300,000s on lots ranging from 10,000 to 12,000 square feet. Bob Leigh & Associates is the listing agency, and lots are available to builders and individuals.

Burnette said the New Urbanism design of places such as Harbor Town on Mud Island was a big influence on the concepts behind Jefferson.

"You've got 2,000-square-foot homes looking across the street at 5,000-square-foot homes, but you don't get the feeling that either of them is detracting from each other," he said.

Two front doors

Jefferson is on the southeast corner of Jaybird and Holly Springs roads in Hernando, just minutes from Interstate 55 to the west and Getwell Road to the east, a locale that's perfectly suited for access to numerous Mid-South destinations.

"It's almost like we've got two front doors," Burnette said.

Indeed, Hernando's location is one of its biggest advantages. Just 20 minutes from Memphis, the town has the amenities of a big city nearby. But many of those are even closer now thanks to DeSoto's rampant commercial growth over the past decade.

"For 25 of the 32 years I've been here, you typically had to go into the city of Memphis to get medical and retail and support services," Burnette said. "Now, Hernando is 10 minutes or less from a major hospital, from a mall, the DeSoto Civic Center, the joint campus of Ole Miss and Northwest Mississippi Community College.

"You have all those things that were once anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour away now a short drive up the interstate."

Burnette cited the arrival of Baptist Memorial Hospital-DeSoto in Southaven as the biggest boon for the county. He said that alone drew more development and more young professionals to the community than ever before.

"It puts a stamp of approval on an area as a good place to go," he said.

Peek at history

The subdivision's name harkens back to Hernando's early days, when it was a settlement called Jefferson, founded in 1833. It was later renamed Hernando and became the seat of DeSoto County.

A Civil War-era cemetery is near the subdivision, and "Jefferson" also is the county seat of William Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County.

"The name 'Jefferson' just has a feel to it that corresponds to what we envision being," Burnette said.

With its historical and literary connotations, Jefferson clearly is rooted in Hernando's history. But for Burnette, the future is equally important for this development's success.

As Hernando continues to grow - evidenced by new retail offerings such as a Wal-Mart Supercenter - Jefferson is prepared to grow with it.

Jefferson Group and Looney Ricks Kiss have tentative plans for the second phase of Jefferson, which will be decidedly different than the first one, with smaller, garden-style homes and a community pool.

But they also brought versatility to Jefferson so that it can meet the demands of the consumer.

"We're going to let the market tell us what to do," Burnette said.

-Eric Smith, Reporter