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New urbanism communities blend best of old Old town principals put the emphasis on pedestrians rather than the automobile

When one asks people about their favorite cities in Mississippi, chances are they will talk about places such as Oxford or Natchez that are based on old town principals.

Old town principals put the emphasis on pedestrians rather than the automobile, and allow for mixed-use development. For example, in Oxford on the square are restaurants, a bookstore, clothing stores and offices. And within a block there are churches and housing ranging from single-family homes to duplexes and condominiums.

"That type of development encourages interaction and empowers the pedestrian," said Mark Frascogna, managing member of Neopolis Development, LLC, the developer of Lost Rabbit development at the Ross Barnett Reservoir. "You don't need to get in your car to do a lot of the things you might be doing in the course of a normal day. It definitely builds a greater sense of community because people have more opportunities to interact. When everyone is in a car with the windows rolled up, they are not communicating with anyone except maybe on the cell phone."

Lost Rabbit community is based on New Urbanism principles that encourage mixed-use development that makes it easy for people to walk to shops, restaurants, schools, churches and work. Frascogna said there are a number of advantages to this type of development in comparison to the standard suburban model — a car-based development with single-use zoning — which represents most of the developments in the U.S. since World War II.

"The problem with single-use zoning is it requires everyone to commute, which in itself presents a number of problems," Frascogna said. "New Urbanism represents the single most important shift in the way we are building America. Some people refer to New Urbanism as the new environmentalism. The reason for that is we spend a lot of time and effort looking at how to protect the environment, and rightfully so. But we haven't taken a good look before at the human-built environment, and New Urbanism addresses that, our human habitat. New Urbanism combined with green building practices is really for the first time taking a holistic look at human built environment, which is critical and enormously important to quality of life."

Lost Rabbit started offering homes for sale approximately three years ago. Currently, 60 are built or under construction. In addition to that, it has three mixed-use buildings in its town center currently under construction totaling roughly 40,000 square feet of space.

From the perspective of zoning and issues such as building setbacks, some might visit a place such as Lost Rabbit today and say it is kind of radical. It is really different. But Frascogna said if one drives to cities such as Vicksburg and Natchez, one can find street after street that is designed just like this.

Response to the offerings at Lost Rabbit have been great.

"We have sold a majority of our lots," Frascogna said. "People especially appreciate the architecture, which is distinctively different because it is traditional architecture. The vast majority of Americans prefer traditional architecture for their residences over modern architecture."

Michael Grey Jones, Tupelo, a partner/owner of JBHM Architecture and Planning who is pres-

ident of the American Institute of Architects in Mississippi, said people enjoy the idea of not having to get into their car to go everywhere.

"It is a green idea," Jones said. "New Urbanism is a good idea because it is based off walkable communities. People like living in the areas where they shop and their children go to school. People like being around those kinds of areas."

One disadvantage is that areas such as this become so popular it pushes housing prices up. That makes it difficult for people who need affordable housing. Jones said that can be addressed by Smart Code, an alternative to traditional single-use zoning that incorporates the principles of New Urbanism, by including affordable housing areas in the master plan.

In some cases such as Lost Rabbit and Tradition, a large planned community on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, an entire new town is being built with New Urbanist designs. But the concept also works in redeveloping existing towns. For example, Jones said in Tupelo there is a unique opportunity to expand downtown into the Fairpark District having a mixed-use area with high-density housing along with offices and restaurants.

"You already have the infrastructure," Jones said. "It is a good thing and a good place to do economic development. Investments in downtowns have some of the best returns on investment. There is about a \$40 return for every dollar put into downtown development. Mississippi's 50 Main Street programs have generated as much as \$1 billion in economic development. The cost per job generated is only \$2,100 per job, which is phenomenal compared to what we had to do to get some of these big industries."

Jones said the advantage to Smart Code is it sets up a system that creates better livable communities and encourages density where infrastructure already exists. It also makes the community more walkable. For example, with Smart Code streets are deliberately kept narrow. Narrower streets encourage drivers to slow down. If the road is built as wide as possible, cars go 50 miles per hour making it more dangerous for pedestrians.

Kellis Moore, sales/marketing coordinator, The Township at Colony Park, describes her development as a "live work shop" community that offers an alternative to the typical suburban lifestyle by providing residences and all the amenities of a big city within walking distance. She defines the concept of New Urbanism as a quality of life movement that promotes the neighborhood as the vital component to establish community in every sense of the word.

Often, New Urbanism communities grow in value more rapidly than the typical suburb.

"There are numerous examples around the country that prove that real estate values in New Urbanism developments meet or exceed the values of other real estate in their respective markets, whether it is office, retail or residential," Moore said. "This is attributed to quality of life, convenience, sense of community and the reduction of required vehicle trips for adults and children alike because of readily available basic services within walking distance."

The Township at Colony Park includes approximately 250,000 square feet of Class

A office space, 225,000 square feet of retail space, multiple residential offerings, hotels and many recreational opportunities.

"We just completed a 70,000-square-foot, mixed-use building containing retail/office space and luxury loft apartments," Moore said. "Also, we have recently completed lakefront residential condominiums, many of which are already sold. Soon, there will be a 20,000-square-foot building under construction for Metropolitan Bank. The recently announced partnership between St. Dominic and The Club will bring a 34,000-square-foot premier health-focused lifestyle center to include a luxury spa, resort-style pool and 10 tennis courts including pro shops. The Embassy Suites hotel recently opened and there are two additional hotels coming. Overall, The Township is experiencing tremendous growth and we anticipate additional exciting announcements in the near future."

There has also been a lot of interest in the 4,800-acre Tradition planned community north of Biloxi and Gulfport.

"With Tradition's inland location at 100 feet above sea level, the public's response post-Katrina has been amazing," said Brynn W. Joachim, vice president of sales and marketing for Tradition. "This coupled with the benefits of living in a master planned community have simply increased the interest."

Joachim said one of the most challenging objectives faced was expanding beyond simply a custom home community and offering a new product that more prospective home buyers in the market could afford. It has done this successfully with the introduction of its "Front Porch Collection" of homes priced from \$163,999 to \$287,999. Interest from the public has doubled since the nine new home plans were rolled out in November 2008.

"In this cost-conscious economy, everyone is looking at ways to stretch their dollar, and housing is no different," Joachim said. "One of the main advantages of a New Urbanist community like The Village at Tradition is that by placing schools, places of work, shops, entertainment and professional services within a short walk, bike ride or drive, residents can not only save money on gas, but also enjoy a better quality of life."

"We also feel that New Urbanism weaves the best things of about our past — charming, traditional architecture, tree-lined streets, the corner grocery store and a friendly smile from your neighbor — with the benefits of modern living. Open, spacious floorplans, smart home wiring, home automation and wireless hot spots make for a perfect marriage of technology and convenience. Also, New Urbanist communities tend to be on the cutting edge of issues such as sustainable development and 'green living.'"

Tradition now has a population of 14 residents, including the founder, Joseph C. Canizaro, and his wife, Sue Ellen. William Carey University will open its new Coast Campus in the Town Center in August 2009 and the first phase of the Village Center will open in December 2008. Tradition is partnering with the YMCA to build a satellite location at the Village Center operating a fitness facility and community pool. Seven homes are under construction, and another 15 homes scheduled to start within the next year.