



## **Multiplication in the north**

While there are construction projects for new homes all over the county, it's still the northern half that's seeing the lion's share of growth and where the aforementioned developments are located. The area north of State Road 16 and west of U.S. 1, up to County Road 210, has seen population growth of more than 400 percent since 2000. That northern area east of U.S. 1 has seen growth of almost 200 percent.

And the extreme northwest corner of the county has grown by about 140 percent.

But because there is still so much room there and because of the desirability — especially with Jacksonville commuters — those areas of rapid growth are poised for even more. Practically every large development currently under way or in the approval process is located north of S.R. 16, and most are north of International Golf Parkway.

Konchan said her department is not seeing much of the large-scale developments that were coming across 10-15 years ago, mostly because the prime parcels have already been taken. Most of them have approval to build that was granted years ago, but market forces caused the owners to delay development.

## **Leading the way**

Among the developments that pushed through the housing market crash and recession almost a decade ago is Nocatee. It's now among the most successful residential developments in the country. It has changed the look of the county, and it's not anywhere close to completion. According to developer The PARC Group, there have been about 4,200 homes sold in the community to date. But there's room to almost triple that number by final build out. It is approved for 12,579 total homes.

Currently, the development near Ponte Vedra Beach is selling at a pace of more than 1,000 homes a year.

Former county Planning and Zoning Agency member Brad Nelson said Nocatee is the development that set such a high standard in northern St. Johns County. "It's absolutely first class," Nelson said. "This is the kind of development we want. That's smart growth. That's where it should have been. That's where it needed to be.

"Nocatee will still see strong growth because so many people still commute to Jacksonville. That will be a major development. It will be a major employment center."

Roger O'Steen, founder of The PARC Group, said the market downturn in the last decade clearly slowed the development. But as soon as the market rebounded, Nocatee claimed its place as one of the country's fastest-growing communities.

"The Nocatee landowners (the Davis family) had the forethought to know that their land was in the growth corridor, and they had the vision to undertake a bold plan to build regional infrastructure and incorporate components of smart growth to plan for that growth," O'Steen said in an email to *The Record*.

## **Filling in elsewhere**

While Nocatee has the northeast section of the county covered, the vast areas west of U.S. 1 are far from filled. And there's no shortage of developers lining up to change that. Despite large neighborhoods such as Julington Creek at or near capacity, there still seems to be strong consumer demand.

Andy Smith, regional development manager for Freehold Communities, the developer for Shearwater, said there are still plenty of people looking to move to St. Johns County, especially those employed in Duval County.

The first few houses for Shearwater have just gone up, and Smith said there are many reasons builders are able to draw customers to the area.

“I think the reason we picked St. Johns County is because of all the projected growth, schools, transportation corridors, access to the beach, great access to commercial and restaurants and shopping,” Smith said. “There is a housing shortage in the area of Shearwater. There are a lot of communities that are closed.”

Even with so much competition for homebuyers in northern St. Johns County, he said quality developments can succeed in the market.

Smith said the county has so many positives on its own that developers simply have to offer the things customers want. He said Shearwater has made a big effort to start construction of its amenities center early in the project so potential buyers would see that they don’t have to wait a few years to get the full benefits of the community.

One of the reasons people leave Jacksonville or somewhere else to join a master-planned community like Shearwater, Smith said, is having recreation opportunities just outside their doors and good schools right in the neighborhood.

He said well-planned communities like his own and like Nocatee can continue to attract new residents if they’re done right.

“I think that developers should more look at: ‘What do their buyers want?’” Smith said. “One of the things we’ve done is we took bike lanes off the road and made it safe for people to ride their bikes. They want to live life in the outdoors. We’ve tried to create that for the buyer.”

### **The spark**

Much of the county’s recent growth is tied to that of Jacksonville, which went from the 22nd-largest city in the country in 1980 to No. 14 by 2000, adding about 200,000 residents in that period for a total of about 735,000.

County planner Teresa Bishop said she started seeing rapid growth in the northwest part of St. Johns County in the 1980s as the Mandarin area of Jacksonville began getting more crowded.

“I think people started leaving the Mandarin area,” for St. Johns County, she said. “They could still work in Jacksonville. They saw St. Johns County as a more rural area at the time.”

It didn’t stay that way long, as Jacksonville gained population and stature in the business world. It received added national attention when it received an NFL franchise, and the Jacksonville Jaguars started playing there in 1995.

As the city prospered, activity just south of its border began to rise.

O’Steen, who developed Marsh Creek in southern St. Johns County, was one of those who saw the opportunity for huge growth in the north, which is why he got involved in the Nocatee project.

“St. Johns County’s growth over the past 20-30 years is the result of growth along the I-95 corridor between Duval County and St. Johns County, where most of the job growth has occurred,” he said. “In addition, there has been organic job growth in the northern St. Johns County areas like St. Augustine and Ponte Vedra Beach from major employers such as the PGA Tour, Ring Power, Grumman Corp. (now Northrup Grumman), Flagler College, the tourist industry and many small manufacturing and service companies.”

### **Now what?**

With St. Johns County now well-known to tourists and those looking to relocate, there is almost a guarantee of continued rapid growth — barring a sustained economic downturn.

A January 2016 population projection study from the University of Florida estimates the number of people living in St. Johns County will increase to a total of between 273,000 to 365,000 by 2030 from the current 213,000.

With top-rated schools, low taxes, low crime, proximity to jobs and recreation opportunities, among other factors, developers are going to continue to invest in St. Johns County. It has traditionally drawn more affluent, well-educated residents — people who can afford to buy nice houses.

According to U.S. Census data for 2009-13, 41 percent of county residents 25 or older had a college degree. That was 15 percentage points higher than the overall state rate. During the same period, the median household income for county residents was \$64,876, about \$18,000 more than for the state at-large.

The information shows the home ownership rate to be 77 percent for the county compared to 67 percent for the state.

Added to those numbers is the fact that St. Johns County has consistently enjoyed one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state, reporting a rate of 3.5 percent in December.

“The metrics make sense for residential growth,” Smith said. “A lot of those metrics make St. Johns County a great place.”

Even with so many players in the housing market — both new and old — O’Steen said it appears strong enough to support the many projects.

“I would describe the housing market as ‘healthy’ as a result of the strong North Florida economy and consistent job growth,” he said. “The larger planned communities will build out over many years, and planning for growth is strategically important for our future.

“We have a good balance of jobs, growth, county services and lifestyle.”

### **A glance at some of St. Johns County’s newest developments**

This is an overview of some of the emerging developments in St. Johns County that have recently commenced building or are in the application process. This is a list of the larger developments, but it does not cover every development. Also included are a couple of established communities that still have ample room for growth.

**Bannon Lakes** — Approved for 849 single-family lots and 150 multi-family units in the World Golf Village area. Site construction recently commenced.

**Bocage** — Under staff review for up to 543 units in the northwest near the river.

**Cordova Palms** — Application calls for up to 750 housing units on 116 acres on U.S. 1 North. Approval still pending.

**Creekside at Twin Creeks** — There are 592 single-family lots currently under construction.

**Crescent Key** — U.S. 1 South development for 215 homes is now selling.

**Deerfield Preserve** — Platting for Phase 2 underway for 105 homes. Project is near another new development off S.R. 207, Ashby Landing South (128 single-family homes planned). Up to 281 total homes allowed for Deerfield.

**King’s Grant** — Development at S.R. 206 has been denied by County Commission, but owner is suing to gain approval to build 999 total housing units. **Madeira** — Site of former Ponce Resort approved for 749 homes, just asked for extension to complete build out. Fewer than 100 homes have been built so far.

Markland — Currently under construction for 345 single-family lots on 314 acres in the World Golf Village area.

Middlebourne — Proposed for 450 homes at the intersection of Longleaf Pine Parkway and Veterans Parkway. Still under staff review.

Nocatee — Premier master-planned community in the northeast has sold more than 4,200 homes. Approved for 12,579 residential units.

Palencia — This mature development is planned for 2,350 homes (including multi-family) with about 1,300 homes currently occupied. Lennar Homes bought more than 500 single-family lots two years ago and is selling now.

RiverTown — Large development of 4,057 acres in the northwest corner with 4,500 residential units approved.

Samara Lakes — A total of 872 entitled single-family lots around Pacetti Road.

San Salito — Near Heritage Park, this is a current project with 473 single-family homes approved.

Shearwater — Approved for 2,600 residential units — includes 670 single-family lots in Phase 1; six model homes built and amenities center under construction for the development near C.R. 210.

SilverLeaf — Planned for a total of 10,700 homes (including multi-family), project was approved in 2006 but still not built. Modifications were approved in 2015.

Steeplechase — Still in the application phase, there would be up to 965 homes on 836 acres near C.R. 208.

TrailMark — This 2,278-unit entitlement (up to 600 can be multi-family) in the northwest. Its first few houses just went up.

Treaty Oaks — Set for 434 homes off S.R. 207 near the I-95 interchange.

Twin Creeks — Home of future Crystal Lagoons project, this development near I-95 at C.R. 210 is expected to include 1,030 multi-family units and 1,250 single-family lots (2,280 total residential).

Windward Ranch — Up to 580 single-family lots available in this community off S.R. 16.