

Amenity center arms race is on in St. Johns County

By Derek Gilliam
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Walter O'Shea remembers when he was planning Palencia in the early 2000s and residents' preferences began to shift.

At that time, residential developments in Northeast Florida offered golf courses, tennis courts and pools, but not much else.

However, O'Shea, a managing director at Houston-based Hines, saw an emerging trend of residents increasingly reported higher levels of satisfaction from nature-based amenities that allowed them to get outside and interact.

Hines attempted to deliver on those demands with the Palencia community near St. Augustine.

They added walkways over wetlands, tree-shaded sidewalks, a three-quarters-of-a-mile pier that extended out over marshland and open water in addition to the golfing and pool amenities.



CHET FROHLICH

With residential development once again in a boom phase, other developments, particularly in St. Johns County have been pumping up their amenities to stand out in a crowded field.

Nocatee, one of the fastest selling master-planned communities in the U.S., was one of the first residential developments to recover after the economic downturn.

“In Nocatee, amenities are the hub of social gathering and recreation, and community interaction is important to the residents,” said Rick Ray, president and CEO of Nocatee’s developer The PARC Group. “Therefore, the amenities have become central to the Nocatee lifestyle and as the developer, we try to offer amenities that are very unique to our community.”

That 13,000-acre development features an eight-acre water park complete with waterslides and a lazy river. It also has an 75-acre community park that contains grass fields, a dog park and three miles of greenway trails.

Shearwater took the nature theme even further as it centered its entire image around nature-themed amenities with the epicenter of the community being a Kayak Club near a future kayak and canoe launch on Trout Creek.

Freehold Communities is the developer on that project.

“We were very intentional about the amenities we included based on what today's buyers are looking for in a community amenity center,” said Suzanne Maddalon, Freehold Communities vice president of marketing. “We have seen a tremendous response to Shearwater and its Kayak Club.”

Shearwater also has a lazy river, which it touts as the longest in the area.

While nature-themed amenities are what's hot now, the market is already shifting to accommodate millennials as they reach peak homebuying ages.

Markland is a development off International Golf Parkway that will be much smaller than the mega developments in the area. It's being developed by the same company that developed Palencia.

O'Shea is the principal working on that project. He said some of Markland's amenities will focus on creating a social environment, pointing to the coffee bar on the first floor of the development's clubhouse.

Also, technology is important to millennials, and future developments will need to cater to those needs. He said that Markland uses a “fitness on demand” system in its fitness center. The system has a computer screen terminal that will allow residents to select different fitness courses and different instructors with the touch of a button.

“It's something we learned from using in multifamily projects and seeing how millennials reacted to it,” O'Shea said. “I think it's something that's going to have traction in the broader audience as well.”