

Beachwalk taking shape as lagoon fills

Second Crystal Lagoon completed in the U.S. is the centerpiece of neighborhood striving for a unique experience.

By Andrew Warfield
February 16, 2018

John Kinsey stood on the south shoreline of the lagoon, pointing toward the north shore while discussing what will await the residents of Beachwalk.

There will be a beach of white quartz sand, which he described as similar to what is found at Fort Walton Beach.

There also will be a private beach club for residents only, mini-golf, a swim-up bar, waterslides, a dog splash park and more.

Where he stood will be boutique retail and restaurants overlooking the crystal clear water, inviting patrons to pause and admire the view of an inland lagoon several miles from the nearest beach.

“It’s going to look pretty cool,” said Kinsey, principal of Twin Lakes Development Associates, the developer of Beachwalk in northern St. Johns County.

The centerpiece, 14-acre lagoon, though, wasn’t an existing natural feature when site clearing began. Nor is an excavated retention pond serving the dual purpose of utility and amenity.

Rather, the lagoon is essentially a giant, 36 million-gallon swimming pool, the second of its kind to be completed in the United States by Crystal Lagoons, a Chile-based company with U.S. headquarters in Miami. There are more than 60 Crystal Lagoons in operation around the world and several more are under development. The company holds patents in 190 of the world’s 195 countries.

As he spoke, several workers waded in the partially filled lagoon, manually vacuuming the liner as a gust of wind blows a cloud of sand into the clear water. At about 350,000 gallons of water per day — added only during overnight hours when consumer demand is lowest — it would take about 100 days to fill the lagoon.

“See that?” Kinsey asked about the mini-dust storm. “Now we have to vacuum all that out.”

Until the depth reaches 3 feet, the lagoon's robotic vacuums cannot operate. Once that threshold is reached and throughout operation of the lagoon, cleaning is achieved via automation. Depths will range from zero-entry at the beach surrounding much of the lagoon to 10 feet at the seawall that defines the south shore, where the retail component will be.

No cookie-cutter neighborhood

"We've owned this property for a long time," Kinsey said.

It's part of the New Twin Creeks Planned Unit Development, a designated 3,000-acre Development of Regional Impact on both sides of County Road 210 across U.S. 1 from the western border of Nocatee. Kinsey's group has owned the site for 13 years.

"Three years ago, we reactivated the Twin Creeks DRI and we were looking at what to do here," he said.

Kinsey knew what he and development partner Encore Capital Management didn't want. They were aware of what Beacon Lake, across the highway from Beachwalk was planning. His development company had sold the site to BBX Capital Partners. Adjacent to Beacon Lake is Creekside, which Kinsey's company is developing.

Both are single-family communities with somewhat traditional amenity packages.

Beacon Lake does have a centerpiece, 43-acre "paddle-friendly" pond with a boardwalk and Crew House.

Other than that, they are not dissimilar in concept to other surrounding communities.

Kinsey wanted Beachwalk to stand out.

"You look at the developments that dominate and they all follow a pretty predictable pattern. It's Northeast Florida cottage architecture with the shingled roofs, live oaks and magnolias," he said.

"They are all nice communities, but quite frankly they all look the same. We looked around and said the last thing this market needs is more of the same stuff," he said.

More of the same would result in a neighborhood competing with similar developments in which the only differentiating factor is the price point.

"Instead, we decided to go to the opposite end," Kinsey said.

"Let's create a community that is going to be a higher-end experience and with the most unique amenity we could do. About that time we learned about Crystal Lagoons and did a lot of research into the technology behind it and the practicality of building it," he said.

"It's not difficult, it's just big."

The next step was to design a neighborhood concept around a Crystal Lagoon.

To capture a Caribbean vibe, the architectural style of the homes, clubhouse and likely the retail village will be Key West and West Indies.

Lennar Homes, Vintage Estate Homes and Americrest Luxury Homes are building products new to their companies.

There will be golf cart paths throughout, allowing residents to access the beach club and other amenities without having to drive their cars.

“The whole community really is walkable,” Kinsey said. “You really can walk to the beach.”

Homes will be priced from the high \$300,000s to the \$800,000s, the most expensive of them three-story duplex villas along the banks of the lagoon.

“If you want to buy one of the villas on the lagoon, it's going to have an ‘8’ in front of it,” said Kinsey. “They are an extraordinary product. They will be creatively designed.”

Maintaining a Crystal Lagoon, including water use, is a fraction of what a golf course costs — a similar-sized investment — according to Crystal Lagoons Regional Director Chris Souza, who spoke at the Meninak Club of Jacksonville last December. With its proprietary technology, a Crystal Lagoon filters and recirculates about 2 percent of its total volume of water per day.

Rather than chemicals, impurities are detected by embedded sensors and eradicated via ultrasonic disinfection pulses. All Crystal Lagoons are monitored and the water quality maintained at a single central control station.

Kinsey said the total cost of living in Beachwalk will be similar to living in Nocatee and owning a membership at Serenata Beach Club.

Beach Club membership dues are \$2,400 a year. CDD fees are \$2,600 to \$3,300 per year depending on home size. Operations and maintenance costs are \$660 per year, which includes maintenance of community entry feature and landscaping. HOA fees are \$200 to \$4,530 per year, the higher fee applied only to homes within the Atlantica Isles area, which include lawn and landscape maintenance, exterior painting, villa insurance and pest control. All Beachwalk residents are required to be members of the Beach Club.

For fee specifics, it is recommended to contact the builders directly. For builder information, visit MyBeachwalkHome.com.

In addition to the lagoon and associated amenities, the developer is investing \$35 million to widen County Road 210 from two to six lanes and provided two school sites to the St. Johns County School District. Of Beachwalk's 1,200 acres, 500 are set aside for preserve.

Commercial interest

Directly across County Road 210 from Beachwalk is a 30-acre commercial parcel.

New Twin Creeks PUD is entitled for 1 million square feet of retail/commercial space, 700,000 square feet of office and 1.95 million square feet of light industrial/office campus space.

Within Beachwalk is a planned 175,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space, but potential tenants have taken a wait-and-see approach, Kinsey said.

“We all are anxious for the retail component,” Kinsey said. “A lot of those who do retail seem to think people who live in northern St. Johns County don't really exist, or if they do exist they don't really want to spend any money. They don't go out to dinner. They don't buy stuff. Or they have this deep-rooted desire to drive 30 miles round-trip to be able to go out to dinner.”

Kinsey said commercial interest in Beachwalk has increased now that progress is evident.

“They are all starting to get the idea as they see the first part of 210 widening open,” he said. “They see the water going into the lagoon and they say, ‘Oh this is really happening.’ Assuming we get good timing on them removing the lines, we look to open all of the 210 widening by this summer.”

Although there won’t likely be any restaurants in Beachwalk by summer, Kinsey said he has plans to draw a crowd to the Crystal Lagoon.

“We’re going to open the Village Green area and on Friday nights we’ll bring in half a dozen or more food trucks and drink trucks and have our Friday and Saturday night beach parties,” he said.

“If we get the right kind of turnout for that, anybody who questions whether we have the right demand for restaurants here will go away pretty quickly,” Kinsey said.