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A RESPONSE TO SPRAWL

Mixed-use developments rise outside perimeter

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The Horizon condominiums, rising 19 stories above a tree-covered hill in Cobb County, signal more than just another successful building project.

Under construction just north of the Chattahoochee River and I-285, traditional dividing lines between Atlanta and its suburbs, the Horizon is one of the first forays into truly urban living beyond Atlanta. The project, which opens in January, illustrates that the line between urban and suburban is being pushed back by rising intown land prices, continued population growth and many buyers' preference for living close to restaurants, shops and jobs.

"People are beginning to understand that you are going to grow out or you are going to grow up. And now we are beginning to understand the consequences of ever growing out in terms of traffic congestion, time spent away from our families and productivity on our jobs," said Jim Durrett, executive director of the Livable Communities Coalition in Atlanta. The coalition advocates for denser and more varied housing and better land planning.

Cobb is the first county outside of Fulton and DeKalb to see high-rise homes going up. But mixed-used developments similar to Atlanta's Atlantic Station have become a regular subject of discussion in suburban planning councils.

Besides Wood Partner's Horizon building, here's what else is in the works:

- Trammell Crow Residential is building One Vinings Mountain, a 12-story condo in southeast Cobb.
- Nearby, West Village, going up at I-285 and Atlanta Road, will pack in homes, shops and up to 10-story condos. Plans are being developed in the same area of Cobb for three other high-rises.
- East on I-285, The Manhattan, a new 27-story condo rises in the middle of a dense, mixed-use development in northern DeKalb.

- In Gwinnett County, zoning regulations limited high-rise residential until last December. A first project called Bella Verde that will include two 25-story condos will be considered today by the county commission.

- Two other developments, including one by well-known deal maker Wayne Mason, have been proposed near Gwinnett Place Mall.

- Stockbridge approved a high-rise district off I-75 and Eagle's Landing last year. And a developer hopes to have a proposal for a mixed-use building up to 30 stories high before the southside city's council by fall.

For condo buyers Gerry and Carolyn Chatham, the Horizon offers an opportunity to leave their five-bedroom home for something smaller and lower maintenance while staying near friends, church and the east Cobb County community where they have lived for nearly 35 years. They plan to move into the Horizon when it opens next year.

"We are at a time of life now that we are looking to travel," said Gerry, a 67-year-old retiree. "And we thought we could turn a lock and leave and not have to worry about anything."

Multimillion-dollar bets

Developers are making multimillion-dollar bets that thousands are willing to follow the Chathams into high-rises. Building codes and officials consider high-rise buildings as those more than 75 feet tall, or six or more stories.

"We believe this is the future," said Chris Cassidy of the Highlands Companies, which is partnering with Branch Properties to develop the core of West Village. Its 60 acres include 1,200 homes, town homes and condos up to 10 stories tall, along with 63,000 square feet of retail shops.

Nicholas Telasca, president of Branch Properties, said people are looking to return to a "Main Street" feel where they can walk to restaurants, shops and services rather than drive.

Location and cost are helping south Cobb blossom into a soon-to-be hot spot for vertical living.

There is a ready-made housing market for commuters sick of driving. The developments are around the Cumberland District, one of metro Atlanta's largest office and shopping complexes. It is estimated to employ more than 100,000 people. The area is along two interstates, convenient to the airport and a short drive to downtown Atlanta. And it lies between two of metro Atlanta's favorite recreation corridors, the Silver Comet Trail and the Chattahoochee River National Recreation area.

High-rises gain favor

The rising price of land also plays a role because builders prefer to go up when land costs as much as it does along I-285. Cobb set a county price record recently when a plot near I-75 and I-285 sold for \$2.9 million per acre.

County governments, eager to see deteriorating areas turned into lively development, have smoothed the way by changing zoning regulations to allow more density and mixed use. Those districts typically already have infrastructure such as roads and sewers and are near interstates.

Many planners praise high-rises for creating sustainable growth without eating up new land. But homeowners who live near them have concerns. Some question the effect of packing so many new people in schools, roads and other infrastructure.

"We are concerned about traffic and how fast [the developments] seem to be appearing," said Suzanne Ballew of the West Vinings Civic Association.

The association has been lobbying for a new interchange at Atlanta Road and I-285, a new bridge over the Chattahoochee and other improvements to provide some relief from traffic.

"The only thing we can hope for is a slowdown in the housing market, and that will give our infrastructure a chance to catch up," Ballew said.

Durrett said the urbanization of suburbia is not a trend particular to Atlanta. It is happening across Sunbelt cities, which spent the 1980s and 1990s sprawling, but are now facing the same traffic gridlock and land price issues that metro Atlanta does.

"We are beginning to get over our fear of higher density and mixed uses and beginning to see good examples of how it can be done right, where before, we didn't see how that could work here."

Ron Sifen of the Vinings Homeowners Association has a different view.

Developers can market and sell new dense housing, but Sifen questions whether those homes will sustain their value over time.

The one housing type that has kept its value over the decades in metro Atlanta is the single-family home.

"We are concerned that the county has lost sight of that," he said.

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