

## The new look of community

**In an area known more for its sprawling suburbs and commuter lifestyle, new communities with a retro feel are on the cutting edge of neighborhood design.**

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In the late 1990s, when Longleaf was just a gleam in Trey and Frank Starkey's eyes, builders didn't want to touch the developers' dream project.

Infused with something called New Urbanism, the project in southwestern Pasco County felt too newfangled, too expensive and too untested, bigger builders told them.

New Urbanism emphasized walking. Homes and shops clustered together. Civic interaction by architectural design. And builders shunned the higher price tag for New Urbanism.

Raised porches alone, a signature feature in New Urbanism, would add up to \$2,000 per Longleaf home.

"We could never get a super-straight answer from them on why it would cost that much more," said Frank Starkey, who drove the creative side of Longleaf's development.

Now, almost a decade later, New Urbanism is getting a surprising embrace in Pasco County.

Nearly two months after some builders threatened to sue to stop it, the county on July 25 got its first Traditional Neighborhood Development ordinance, codifying standards that began life in the architecture-driven, antisprawl New Urbanism movement.

### **New Urbanism in the Tampa Bay Area**

**Tampa:** Changed land use regulations in July to promote porches.

**Tampa:** West Park Village in Westchase is an example of New Urbanist "traditional neighborhood" design. So are West Bay Village in Largo and the Garden District in Lithia's FishHawk Ranch.

**St. Petersburg:** Rewriting comprehensive plan and land development code to preserve "traditional neighborhoods."

**Pinellas County:** Pinellas By Design strategy document recommends local governments promote concepts of New Urbanism in housing.

### **Other urbanism showcases**

- Kentlands, Md.
- Orenco Station, Ore.

Surrounding cities and counties, like Tampa, St. Petersburg and Pinellas County, are tweaking codes and regulations to incorporate New Urbanist elements, their planners say. But none has enacted an ordinance that sets a blueprint of New Urbanist standards.

With its ordinance, Pasco is just now tuning into a 15-year-old conversation about a movement that is the rage in urban planning circles.

It may change the face of a largely suburban county.

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Frank Starkey is the scion of a Pinellas and Pasco pedigree, whose grandfather's legacy, by land and largesse, can be found on the signposts for Starkey Road in north Pinellas and Starkey Boulevard in New Port Richey.

When Frank Starkey was growing up, he had a 16,000-acre backyard, most of which is today the Starkey Wilderness Preserve.

The dream playground had its downside.

"I didn't have any neighborhood friends to play with," said the 37-year-old architect, a former intern with Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, the architect I.M. Pei's firm. "I would visit schoolmates in subdivisions and be fascinated that we could get on bikes and just ride over to a friend's corner."

For Starkey, something of those childhood memories folded into the clean lines of classicism he grew to love, and seeped into the design values that embody Longleaf today.

The ideas of New Urbanism are simple: The pedestrian is king. Depend less on cars. Diversify and use housing types. Revive downtowns. Respect public space.

Expressed as "traditional neighborhood developments," downtown stores, above-shop apartments and town-hall squares can weave a dreamscape of photogenic nostalgia.

But there is discipline in the design.

In Longleaf, builders must stick to build-to lines, which insist precisely where to raise walls.

Porches are lifted 24 to 30 inches off the sidewalk. They draw level lines of sight between a sitting resident and a passerby, which helps interaction, Starkey said.

In parts of Longleaf, Starkey negotiated street widths down to 18 feet, four feet less than the county allowed, and narrow enough to cross in four strides.

The effect is of a sleek New England town, shorn of slums and roads cracked by frost heave.

Born in the Florida town of Seaside, New Urbanist elements are coming home to roost in places like Disney's Celebration, Tampa and St. Petersburg.

"There are more New Urbanism projects in Florida than any other state in the country," said Christopher B. Leinberger, a fellow of the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., specializing in New Urbanism. "The state's more progressive in land use, and people in Florida drive around to see these things."

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But for most developers, traditional neighborhood developments, or TNDs, are simply riskier.

A TND costs 10 to 25 percent more than a conventional subdivision, developers and analysts say.

Builders charge by the square foot, and, in Florida, only for air-conditioned space, Starkey said. That makes raised porches a hard pill to swallow.

"Selling prices per square foot tend to be 20 to 30 percent higher," Leinberger said. "Ultimately, it's more profitable for developers, but they have to do something different."

A rough-cut market test: In southeast Calgary, Alberta, Carma Developers built a TND next to a conventional subdivision, said Don Whyte, head of Newland Communities' southeast operations and the developer behind New Urbanist designs like the Garden District in Lithia's FishHawk Ranch.

"They sell 5-to-1, five conventional for one TND," he said, of the Calgary example.

That may be why the most successful showcase of New Urbanism in the Tampa Bay area began as an act of faith.

When Brian Sewell, formerly of Terrabrook, proposed the TND concept to his bosses for West Park Village, they had reservations, he said.

The village was born of necessity, tucked in a part of Westchase with high-density zoning and threatened by Tampa's abortive plans to introduce light rail there.

"The village concept stuck, even though the rail plan did not," Sewell said. "Toward the end, we were selling West Park Village at 160 homes a year. Terrabrook was very pleased. They were skeptical at first, but it was well-received."

The risk is playing itself out in Longleaf.

Without a critical mass of passing traffic, Longleaf's downtown suffers from revolving-door tendencies, something Starkey acknowledges.

"The commercial part of it is always difficult to make viable, because you need volume, and you can't always make volume by making people walk to it," said Gerrit Knaap, executive director of the Center for Smart Growth Research and Education in Washington, D.C.

Home sales in Longleaf have reached 21 this year, according to New Port Richey's Cahill Realty. It's up from last year, largely because a new neighborhood is being sold, real estate agent Pat Cahill said. Before 2003, the development was selling about 70 homes a year.

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For all its risks, residents wear such developments as a badge of honor. And of all things New Urbanism, it is the front porch that is its most dearly loved feature.

"I talk to people with strollers coming down the sidewalk when I'm on my porch," said Ray Blush, a Longleaf resident who moved there after 33 years of living in St. Petersburg. "We didn't have a front porch in St. Petersburg that we sat on."

As Pasco turns a market innovation into a regulation, those porches are a reminder of how ordinances can threaten creativity.

If Pasco's TND ordinance had been in effect before Longleaf was built, Starkey may have found himself in a squabble with county planners.

Among other standards, the ordinance requires that TND developments have porches no less than 3 feet higher than the grade. Starkey's are 24 to 30 inches off the sidewalk.

"I can see it being a bit trickier," Starkey said. "They have to take it on faith that it would be okay. ... But from the point of view of the permitting process, the county now has something to fall back from and a position to argue from."

His is a tame reaction.

In May, Pasco was threatened with a lawsuit from some builders unhappy with the move toward TNDs, among other issues, in the county's comprehensive plan changes.

Even developers opposed to the lawsuit were nervous that the county intended to force TND standards on all developments, including Newland Communities on its 7,000-acre Bexley Ranch proposal in central Pasco.

"There's a market for New Urbanism, but I get concerned when municipalities insist that developers produce more of it," Whyte said. "Our concern is that the TND is not the be-

all and end-all. We're not developing 7,000 acres of TND. But there will be aspects of TND in the village center, sure."

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The grandest hope of New Urbanism is that the design of a community can create the sense of one.

Despite price tags in Longleaf that exceed the county's median, Starkey says the goal is to be inclusive. Naming the clubhouse a "town hall," for him, is an act of New Urbanist faith.

The relatively new Longleaf Elementary School is another big step toward a sense of community.  
Starkey hopes to encourage more self-government.

On this count, the jury is out.

"The research on it is mixed on whether it can change the culture of a community," Knaap said.

"Can you change the culture of a community by porches and making things more pedestrian-friendly? That's difficult."

At FishHawk, the Internet has become a way for developers to start residents off in organizing communal Fourth of July celebrations, Easter egg hunts or Halloween parties.

"There's a lot more to community than design," Whyte said. "If design produces more opportunities for community, it's a good thing, but it doesn't need TND to do that."

Still, if Pasco is listening, the New Urbanism conversation is as current as sprawl.

"Urban design matters," Knaap said. "If you build walls and freeways between residents, it makes a difference in the way people interact. ... New Urbanism is still the rage. There's nothing ahead of it."

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