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REAL ESTATE

New construction on the rise in Immokalee, with affordable rentals and higher-end homes for sale



Houses that will be for rent in the Hatchers Preserve development being built by Rural Neighborhoods in Immokalee, FL on Tuesday, May 17, 2016. (Photo by Gregg Pachkowski/Special to the Daily News)

By *Maria Perez* of the Naples Daily News

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Houses for sale on Hamilton Street in the Arrowhead development in Immokalee, FL on Tuesday, May 17, 2016. (Photo by Gregg Pachkowski/Special to the Daily News)

Like many areas of Collier County, residential development is slowly picking up in Immokalee, where developers are building new homes for low-income renters and for buyers willing to pay \$179,900 or more.



Steven Kirk, President of Rural Neighborhoods, at the Hatcher's Preserve development being built by Rural Neighborhoods in Immokalee, FL on Tuesday, May 17, 2016. (Photo by Gregg Pachkowski/Special to the Daily News)

Nonprofit Rural Neighborhoods expects to finish construction of 18 single-family homes next month that will be rented to low-income residents in Hatcher's Preserve, north of Westclox Street and west of Carson Road. The homes, targeting lower-wage workers like service or retail employees, will be rented for between \$650 and \$725 a month to families who meet income requirements. A family of four, for example, must earn \$52,500 a year or less to qualify.



Alberto Castillo paints inside one of the houses in the Hatcher's Preserve development being built by Rural Neighborhoods in Immokalee, FL on Tuesday, May 17, 2016. (Photo by Gregg Pachkowski/Special to the Daily News)

Private developer Fl Star Construction also is building eight single-family homes to sale and is planning six more in the Arrowhead area, south of Lake Trafford Road Although they don't have a timeline, their goal is to build on the 229 lots they bought two years ago for \$625,000 from a bank that foreclosed on the property of a previous developer during the recession.

While serving two different types of clients, both developers are moving ahead on land where homes were envisioned before the real estate crash halted the projects. Their projects come as Habitat for Humanity of Collier County increases its construction of affordable homes in the area.

The nonprofit built 25 to 30 homes a year after 2008, said Nick Kouloheras, executive director at Habitat. Now, with applications going up during the past 18 months, they are starting to build some more, he said. This year, they plan to build about 35 homes.

Elvira Nodal, real estate sales associate with David C. Brown Realty, said construction is starting to increase because there is a lack of inventory.

"It's picking up in Immokalee, and it's picking up everywhere else," said Nodal, who has worked as a Realtor in the area for 25 years.

David Torres, co-owner of Fl Star Construction, said Habitat for Humanity was the only developer building residential construction in Immokalee after the recession until his company and Rural Neighborhoods started to build again.



Maintenance technician Belen Garcia hangs the number on a house in the Hatcher's Preserve development being built by Rural Neighborhoods in Immokalee, FL on Tuesday, May 17, 2016. (Photo by Gregg Pachkowski/Special to the Daily News)

The Arrowhead community is a different development, Nodal says. The homes start at \$179,900 for a three-bedroom, two-bathroom, two-car garage single-family home of 1,475 square feet, she said. The community is targeting middle-class families who want a less expensive option, Nodal said.

"These are people who are working middle class, want a bigger home, and they want to stay in the community because they love Immokalee," she said.

They are workers at the Seminole casino, at restaurants and even a couple of teachers, she said.

The more expensive homes are 1,900 square feet, going for \$210,000, says Torres. He thinks the homes are affordable, and he says there's demand for them.

"We feel it's working," he said. "We are getting buyers."

Nodal says these are the least expensive new homes available in Collier County, with low maintenance fees. Homes built in Arrowhead used to sell for nearly \$300,000 before the real estate crash, she said.

Before the crash, more than 400 units were built in the development, Torres said. That includes about 300 of the units in Crestview Park affordable rental community for low income residents. Others were market-priced single-family homes.

North of Arrowhead, near Westclox Street, Rural Neighborhoods has almost finished building 18 new single-family homes at Hatcher's Preserve. It's the first affordable housing rental community built in the last four years in Immokalee, a community where per capita income is about a third of Florida's average, but where median rents are just a third cheaper than the state average.

The project was envisioned by the Empowerment Alliance of Southwest Florida as a homeownership program. The group bought the land in 2006 and invested about \$430,000 in state and federal funds granted by Collier County to build the infrastructure. But, battered by the recession, the nonprofit decided not to build the houses. About a year ago, Rural

Neighborhoods broke ground to raise the houses on the empty lots of grass.

Collier County granted \$2.1 million in state and federal money to build the homes, said Steven Kirk, president of Rural Neighborhoods.

Kirk said he has noticed a change in residential construction in Immokalee.

"I think it's premature to say that Immokalee residential housing is taking off. I think it's fair to say that there's growing interest," he said.

Kirk's group already offers 240 low-income rental units in different communities in Immokalee and expects to close in June on affordable rental housing communities Timber Ridge and Sanders Pines, which would add 74 units. Hatcher's Preserve will provide a different option for Immokalee residents.

"I think what is unique about these homes, one is they are providing single family homes for rent," he said. "Most rental properties today are multifamily rather than single family homes."

The homes, he said, have a modern and colorful design, which turns them into a unique product in the area. The architectural design, he said, will contribute to revitalize the whole neighborhood, the group's final goal.

Kirk says they want neighbors to feel that change is arriving.

After closing on the purchase of Timber Ridge and Sanders Pines, Rural Neighborhoods also plans to invest \$2.8 million in rehabbing 74 units with money from a Florida Housing Finance Corp. loan and \$600,000 in grants.



About Maria Perez

Maria Perez reports on Southwest Florida multi-ethnic communities for the Naples Daily News. She covers issues that affect these communities such as immigration policy, affordable housing and labor conditions. She joined the Daily News in 2014.

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