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Connerton Kick Off

Though construction continues in the burgeoning community, the first residents move in next month.

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LAND O' LAKES — Like a party host rushing to prepare for his guests, Stew Gibbons is trying to get the first phase of **Connerton** ready for its debut.

The welcome center, known as the Rose Cottage, still lacks **Connerton's** stained-glass nature-oriented motifs. The inlaid wood floors remain unfinished. The front yard is dirt and the rear-entrance flagstones aren't finished.

The mile-long paved walking trail that arcs through wetlands on the west side of the first phase, known as The Arbors, has one end finished near **Connerton** Boulevard, but all the bridges aren't done and the other end of the trail loses itself in the brown earth of unfinished lots.

Nearby, crews are putting the last touches on a row of model homes. The doors are locked to keep out dirt-tracking visitors, including Gibbons and guests. Other workers swarm over houses in various states of completion.

Patrick McCormick and his family will move in next month — provided Pasco County Utilities connects the water and sewer service.

McCormick, a real estate agent from Riverview, is a big supporter of Gibbons' effort to create a walkable, close-knit community on the Conner family's ranch. He and his family of four will be among the first full-time residents of **Connerton**, even as The Arbors continues to rise from the ground.

"I feel pretty strong about **Connerton**, as long as it turns out the way they say," McCormick said.

Connerton's emphasis on walking — to the park, to schools, to shops in the neighborhood's commercial centers — played a big role in drawing McCormick to the project.

"Right now, if we want to go for a walk, it's around in a circle. There's nothing but houses," McCormick said of his current neighborhood.

Over the coming decades, Terrabrook, the company developing **Connerton**, plans to turn more than 5,000 acres in the heart of Pasco County into:

- * Five interconnected "villages," each with its own small-scale downtown;
- * An office complex on U.S. 41 just south of the entrance to the Land O' Lakes Detention Center;
- * A large-scale town center retail project at the junction of **Connerton** Boulevard and a to-be-extended Collier Parkway.

The developer has set aside thousands of acres for conservation, including nearly 3,000 sold last year to the Southwest Florida Water Management District. Smaller conservation areas are linked by wildlife corridors, including one that runs beneath **Connerton** Boulevard.

Terrabrook's conservation efforts have won the support of Pasco environmentalist Jennifer Seney of Wesley Chapel, president of Pascowildlife Inc.

"I think they're doing it as well as they can and better than others," Seney said about a week after touring The Arbors with Gibbons.

The project — one of three "New Town" projects in Florida — has a long way to go and a lot of potential pitfalls, among them the creeping rise of interest rates and the long-delayed extension of Ridge Road.

Gibbons worries less about mortgage rates than about the unfinished road. Ridge Road would end at the entrance to **Connerton** and funnel traffic across the development to Ehren Cutoff and through **Connerton's** town center.

"If Ridge Road doesn't get built, it'll be hard for the town center to get off the ground," Gibbons said.

So far, the bulk of **Connerton's** long-term vision remains covered in trees. The Arbors has sold about 80 of 600 planned homes — ranging in price from about \$250,000 to \$1 million. That includes Gibbons' own home, now under construction at the back of The Arbors' gated section.

Gibbons expects home sales to increase once the welcome center and models are finished in the coming weeks.

The Arbors is likely to remain under construction until 2007. In the meantime, Terrabrook will begin work on the next phase next year, Gibbons said.

That phase, called The Gardens, will feature the same "Traditional Neighborhood" design that has gained popularity at Longleaf near New Port Richey. The Gardens will include homes set close to the street with front porches and garages on rear alleys.

McCormick said he likes the idea of the traditional neighborhood design, but chose to buy into **Connerton** early — even if he has to share the road with construction vehicles and wait months for a grocery store planned for shopping center at **Connerton's** southern entrance on U.S. 41.

"If I were to wait until the next phase, it'll cost me more," McCormick said. "The value is to buy into it before anything's there."