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Suburbia springs from Pasco pasture

Three years ago the 10,000-acre Conner Ranch was sold by its family owners, another of the big old cattle spreads in Central Pasco to be transformed into a suburban residential development.

Now, after 36 months of pushing paper and moving dirt by developer TerraBrook, a potential "new town" is rising out of the former ranchland. Where once cattle grazed, there will be: 8,700 homes in five villages; restaurants; retail, office and commercial space; and a hospital and government center. An active-adult community will be built on a parcel sold to home builder Lennar. There will be pools, a fitness center, tennis courts, trails and nature preserves. Buildout of all this could take more than 10 years.

A welcome center and eight models by six builders have opened, the first resident has moved in, and builders have more than 100 signed contracts.

The models at Connerton are among 65 homes in 40 communities in the fall Tour of Homes that starts today. The tour is sponsored by the Tampa Bay Builders Association. (See the box on Page 5F for details.)

If Connerton marks the next great step forward in the suburbanization and upscaling of Pasco County, it did not get there on its own, as general manager Stewart Gibbons is quick to acknowledge.

Its neighbor immediately to the south, Wilderness Lake Preserve, "was the pioneer" in the Land O'Lakes area, Gibbons said. That award-winning and fast-selling development, with about 1,000 homesites on 680 acres, "established a new dimension for Land O'Lakes in terms of quality of product and pricing," he said.

Homes at Wilderness Lake range in price from the high \$100,000s to \$1-million. Several of the builders there are also active at Connerton.

"The success of Wilderness Lake is important to Connerton. Their substantial success has positioned Connerton for a good future as well," Gibbons said.

Wilderness Lake literally led the way. It got buyers over the line from northern Hillsborough into Pasco County, establishing that it wasn't too far from the job centers in downtown Tampa or along Interstate 75. Now Connerton becomes its next-door neighbor, just north of the bustling State Road 54 corridor that is home to one residential subdivision after another. There are projects on U.S. 41 north of Connerton, and the road that forms its northern boundary, State Road 52, is rapidly giving way to more residential development.

So the real estate truism about location will likely work in Connerton's favor. Add in the retail, grocery stores, services and jobs that will serve residents throughout Central Pasco, and "the perception of Pasco has changed," Gibbons said.

Builders at Connerton's first village of the Arbors, with 265 homesites, are David Weekley Homes, Westfield Homes, Inland Homes, Morrison Homes, Arthur Rutenberg Homes and Costanza Homes. Prices range from \$250,000 to more than \$1-million. All the home designs in the "model row" near the welcome center were developed exclusively for Connerton, Gibbons said. The developer required that the garages be set back five feet from the front face of the house to create an appealing streetscape. "As you drive down the street," Gibbons said, "you see a variety of architectural styles rather than garages."

The welcome center, called Rose Cottage, is supposed to look like a homestead that might have been built on the original ranch. Its mix of roofing and siding materials are intended to suggest that it was added onto over several generations.

It offers one low-tech and one high-tech feature that are noteworthy. Low-tech: a children's playroom with a chalkboard where the kids can amuse themselves while parents examine the displays and watch the tape loops about the community. High-tech: a map that displays the property's various sections and amenities in colored lights.

Models at Connerton are open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, noon to 6 p.m. Sunday. The Web site (enjoy the birdcalls) is www.connerton.com, or call toll-free 1-888-281-0739.