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East Montgomery County braces for rapid growth

By: JENNIFER LEAHY , Managing Editor

Build it and they will come.

At least that is what a bevy of developers are banking on as they break ground on a multitude of new construction sites along the U.S. Hwy 59 corridor.

With population projections for the East Montgomery County area expected to spike, both residential and commercial rooftops are being planned. "There are a hell of a lot of people moving out here," proclaimed Precinct 4 Commissioner Ed Rinehart. And more are projected to be coming. Charted demographic trends indicate that growth rates for the area will approach 30 percent over the next 20 years.

Easy accessibility to downtown Houston is a strong lure for developers.

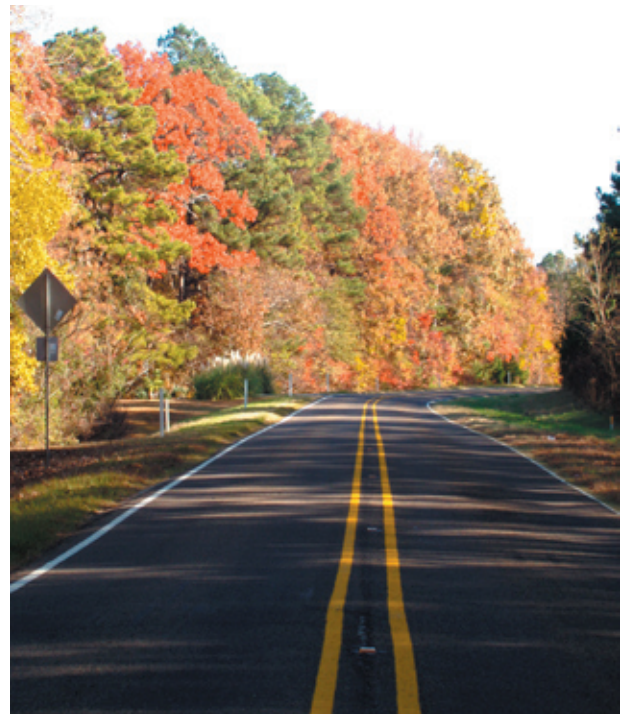
"Let's face it," said East Montgomery Improvement District president Frank McCrady, "You can be downtown in less than 30 minutes. How many other suburban areas of the city can offer that?" At the very minimum there are 10,000 single family homes slated for the area. Several multi-family developments are under construction with more in the planning stages.

According to Texas Department of Transportation traffic counts, 120,000 vehicles crossed the Montgomery County line into Houston in 2002. By 2003, the number increased to 142,000.

The spike in East Montgomery County growth may be attributed to a number of elements. "Things are really heating up out here," said Community Chamber of Commerce president Andy Dill. "It truly is a domino effect. Homes are built, restaurants and stores follow." The May 15 passage of the Restaurant Initiative served as a catalyst for restaurant development in the area. Prior to passage, alcohol could only be served in "private clubs" prompting many larger chain restaurants to shy away from the area.

"The passage of the initiative really was a turning point for the area," noted Community Chamber of Commerce chairman Mike Smith. "Where you have a Chilis or a [T.G.I.] Friday's, you have retail development around. The two go hand-in-hand."

Homewood Suites and **Kingwood Parc** owner and developer Philippe Cras concurs. With a total of 30 acres in Kingwood Parc, Cras has contracted with Los Cucos, a Mexican restaurant chain, to build an upscale establishment opening in the summer of 2005.



Cras is also negotiating with three other restaurant chains. Additionally, he has schematic designs for a 40,400 square foot “first class” business environment designed to “accommodate large or small corporate users” to be built on Loop 494 just inside the Montgomery County line. “We are creating a ‘Kingwood-worthy’ business park -- not pretentious but upscale, homey and warm,” offered Cras.

Across U.S. Hwy 59 from Kingwood Parc a 70-acre retail and commercial development, **Kingwood CrossRoads**, is being planned. Just south of Northpark Drive, the development will feature large, anchor retailers with leases featuring up to 174,121 square feet. More than 750,000 square feet of warehouse, commercial and retail space is planned. “We are in negotiation with several national retailers,” hinted Keith Stone with Blenheim Corporation, the developers of Kingwood CrossRoads.

Just north of Northpark Drive is the newest addition to the Friendswood family of master-planned communities. **Oakhurst at Kingwood**, previously known as “Bentwood,” offers those looking for a home in the \$140,000 to \$600,000 range a variety of options. Golf course views are also available. Upon completion Oakhurst will have a total of at least 1,400 homes. “The decision to invest in that market was easy,” remarked Friendswood Development representative Keith Schoonover. “With the easy accessibility to the central business district [in downtown Houston], we can boast short commute times.”

Amvest Properties owns the parcel of land south of Oakhurst. Rumors of an additional 1,400 homes could not be verified. The Signorelli Company has enjoyed such success with their 360 homes in the **Forest Colony** subdivision that they will be adding an additional 2,300 homes to the parcel just north of the community.

Valley Ranch will feature homes in the \$100,000-\$300,000 range and construction will begin shortly. The project is scheduled to develop over a seven-year period. The master-planned community will also offer two or three multi-family (apartment) projects according Signorelli Company president Danny Signorelli.

Valley Ranch will also feature commercial property. “We are working on a town center type concept which will include everything from strip retail to big box outlets, as well as conveniences such as restaurants, fast food, grocery, etc.,” offered Signorelli. “We will cater to bringing in the anchors for the power centers, with the strip retail ideally occupied by a wide variety of retail and offices. The conceptual plan includes more than 650,000 square feet of commercial development over the life of this project.”

An additional multi-family project, **Montgomery Pines Apartments**, will begin welcoming residents in the first quarter of 2005. The project, which contains 224 one, two and three-bedroom units is a project of the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs.

Even the far northern corners of the corridor are hearing construction noises. **The Lakes of Southern Crossing**, a modular home community, will total approximately 470 lots. “Around 240 lots are sold currently. I also have 150 acres right behind our sales office which will be about 200 lots,” said Lakes of Southern Crossing president Steve Sullivan.

The approximately 1,500 acres of land formerly known as the “old Rice property” will soon have a new name -- **White Stone**. Developer David Ward recently purchased the land that spans a vast area across U.S. Hwy 59 and Roman Forest Boulevard and has announced plans for a master planned community featuring at least 1,500 homes. “It’s tough to say, at this point, exactly how many homes will be built. It depends on how well, and what type of homes sell,” offered Ward.

“This is the last major thoroughfare out of Houston. It’s a high growth area that offers proximity and accessibility,” he continued.

The land previously was owned by the Rice University endowment. The endowment had harvested timber from the acreage throughout the years and recently sold the tract to Ward.

Further north, flanking the Flying J Travel Plaza, is **610 acres** owned by Paul Nelson. Nelson, a player in the development of the “Portofino” shopping center in The Woodlands, has signed Walgreens to a lease and is currently negotiating an anchor site for 225,000 square feet. The total square footage for the upscale center is expected to reach 600,000. At least 1,100 single family homes are also planned according to Nelson. The homes will range from \$130,000-\$190,000. Ground-breaking could occur as early as the first quarter of 2005.

“You won’t recognize the area in 10 years. The development is occurring that quickly,” said Nelson.

Other developers concur. “I chose the 59 corridor a few years ago for several reasons. From an access standpoint, U.S. Hwy 59 provides a much quicker and easier drive to downtown than the other corridors. This assures us that commuters will move to the area, so long as they are happy with schools, hospitals, shopping, and other amenities. In this regard, the area passes with flying colors,” said Signorelli.

Much of the development was aided in part by the ***East Montgomery County Improvement District***.

EMCID, formed in 1997 through Senate Bill 921, collects a \$.01 sales tax on all purchases in a 158-mile region. The funds are used to “promote and maintain economic and community development activities.” Approximately \$500,000 per year is spent on direct cash incentives to businesses looking to relocate or expand in the area.

“Actually, it just depends on the year,” noted McCrady. “The year we brought the Wal-Mart Distribution Center, we allocated additional funds.” “We place a priority on driving growth and stimulating and retaining economic development and growth. All of this will serve to provide a better quality of life and opportunities for residents who live in the area,” said McCrady.

“The Improvement District consistently, on a monthly basis, talks to potential industrial commercial and retail entities,” he continued.

Scholarships to local graduates are also offered by EMCID. “We give \$1,000 (approximately one year’s tuition) to all graduates in the area to be used at the North Harris Montgomery Community College District. It’s our way of investing in the future of the community,” said McCrady.

The ***New Caney and Splendora school districts*** are prepared for the influx of students. “We have seen this coming, done demographic studies,” said New Caney ISD Superintendent Rick Cowan. “We are, and will continue to be, as prepared as possible.”

The district recently announced their retainment of the Texas Education Agency’s “Recognized” designation, despite stricter criteria that caused many districts to fall in the rankings. The New Caney High School academic decathlon team has been ranked in the top three in the state of Texas for the past seven years.

“New Caney has a phenomenal school district thanks to a good board of directors and a visionary superintendent. Their results make this area attractive to many families with school-age kids, as we all want the best environment and education for our children. Additionally, this location places us very close to jobs, excellent hospitals, shopping, and is less than 15 minutes from one of the largest airports in the world,” said Signorelli.

Navigating the region should prove an easy feat after a planned expansion of U.S. Hwy 59 over the course of the next few years. A four-lane expansion, through Community Drive, is scheduled to occur within five years.

The Grand Parkway, segment G, will also serve to connect the area with Interstate Highway 45 to the east and I-10 to the west. Initial environmental impact studies are currently being conducted. “The construction of the Grand Parkway will make great strides in alleviating some of this traffic hopefully TxDot will move efficiently with the expansion of the State roads as well,” said Signorelli. “The area is facing exponential growth. It’s time to brace ourselves,” concluded Dill.

For additional information about road construction in the area, please visit the Web site, www.dot.state.tx.us