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A grand plan for growth Lancaster: \$300 million community would bring parks, posh homes

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Lancaster's development boom may soon become an explosion.

Lancaster Preserve LP has announced plans to build a 766-acre mixed-use community in the southern portion of the city that eventually could attract as many as 8,000 new residents.

The \$300 million project, called The Preserve, would include a town center, private parks, a senior citizen community and custom homes, including some that would cost around \$1 million. Although work could start in early 2007, pending approval from city officials, the development would be phased in over 10 years.

Close to 2,500 housing units could ultimately be included in The Preserve, which developers tout as the first mixed-use development of this magnitude in southern Dallas County.

"It's going to have a tremendous impact on the city when it's built out," said Lancaster Mayor Joe Tillotson. "It will certainly bring something we've needed, in the form of high-end housing."

The Preserve plans come on the heels of The Allen Group's development of a 6,000-acre Dallas Logistics Hub, which is scheduled to break ground this year, and the Union Pacific Corp. intermodal rail terminal, which began operations in 2005.

Steve Topletz, general partner for Lancaster Preserve, said plans for The Preserve would complement those two major projects.

"The city of Lancaster has been working with us hand-in-glove in the zoning process and everything else to make sure everyone is in agreement," Mr. Topletz said.

Plans for The Preserve are being considered by the city's Planning and Zoning Commission, which held a public hearing in September and continues to have workshops on the proposal. The commission's next work session is scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday at the James R. Williams Pump Station, 1999 Jefferson St.

If approved by that board, the project would go before the City Council for final approval.

Last year, Mr. Topletz sued the city in a dispute involving an unrelated residential project in which he wanted to place utility poles above ground. The city rejected his request, but a district judge eventually ruled in Mr. Topletz's favor.

So far, there have been no major roadblocks for the current development - which would be on rolling wooded land between Interstates 35 and 45. He said the idea for The Preserve came from a need for a new type of mixed-use housing development.

"We were approached by business people in the community who literally work here every day but don't live here," Mr. Topletz said. "We needed to do some homework in this regard."

What the developer determined was that Lancaster has been underserved in terms of residential development, especially for homes costing between \$400,000 and \$1 million.

The initial phase of The Preserve will be a gated enclave with homes starting at \$500,000.

Despite the support of city officials and many residents, the project is not without opposition.

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Wendell Prince, who lives near the project site, said he is worried about water runoff and potential flooding that such a massive development might cause.

"You're talking about hundreds of acres of cement being put on top of land that is now agriculture land," Mr. Prince said.

Romeo Lewis, who has lived in the area for 15 years, said the plans call for a shopping area and supermarket directly across from his home. "Like anybody else, I really don't want that at my front door."

"My major concern is the type of development they are portraying are things like senior citizens housing and a gated community and all that," Dr. Lewis said. "But once they get the zoning they want, are they going to do pretty much what they want?"

Dr. Lewis said he knows development is going to come to his area of Lancaster sooner or later. He just hopes some of the rural character that makes the land so attractive is preserved.

But Terry Stinson, a lifelong resident of Lancaster, said he does not believe the new development would be detrimental to the community of about 33,000 people.

"I think it'd be a positive thing for the city," said Mr. Stinson, a former City Council member. "I think people investing money in our community is a good thing."

He also said that Lancaster's location - about 15 miles south of downtown Dallas and between three interstate highways - makes it a prime spot for development.

"Obviously it's not going to stay rural forever," Mr. Stinson said. "It's just a matter of trying to do the best we can for the area."