

Dallas Morning News, The (includes Arlington Morning News)(TX)

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September 28, 2004

'Living the dream'

Craig Ranch's 'new urbanism' realizes developer's vision

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David Craig had a simple plan four years ago.

Accumulate property at the Custer Road-State Highway 121 intersection - where Plano, Frisco, McKinney and Allen converge - then prepare one-acre lots for estate houses and larger tracts for office buildings.

"Typical suburban sprawl," he called the development.

Today, Craig Ranch is anything but typical. Plans call for a pedestrian friendly, new-urbanism approach to the 2,000 acres.

Thanks to a recently opened PGA Tour golf course, a sports complex and fast-growing residential communities, Craig Ranch could become North Texas' mixed-used development centerpiece.

Cooper Aerobics Center announced two weeks ago that it will open a 73,000-square-foot facility next to the golf course, helping Craig Ranch give McKinney the national cachet Plano has with Legacy business park.

When built out, Craig Ranch could be home to 30,000 people living on high-end estate lots, in townhomes and in multiplex buildings, and where 20,000 will work.

Craig Ranch sits about five miles south of where Mr. Craig, 48, first cut his teeth on land development along U.S. Highway 380 about 25 years ago. The 47-acre parcel, he says, became Meadow Ranch Estates.

In 1987, with the real estate industry in Texas beginning to fail, Mr. Craig kept an office in McKinney but also started operations in Southern California.

He returned to McKinney in 1994 and completed some smaller projects. Now he's become one of the area's high-profile developers and is reluctant to take days off.

Indeed, rather than take a honeymoon three years ago, he hosted a new urbanism seminar led by Florida architect Andres Duany.

His enthusiasm is unmistakable. A simple "How are you doing?" is greeted with "I'm living the dream at Craig Ranch."

And he's not afraid to go over budget.

Though he won't divulge investment details, the golf course - once projected to cost about \$30 million - exceeded \$40 million.

That, he says, is simply good business. Adjacent estate lots that started at \$400,000 now fetch up to \$650,000.

Mr. Craig has silenced project critics who believed new urbanism would fail at Craig Ranch because there was no surrounding employment base to support the project.

"It was an awful lot of development to start from scratch," said Art Lomenick, Trammell Crow managing director with no Craig Ranch affiliation but who's recognized for his work at Addison Circle and Uptown.

"It was bold - very bold - to bite off that kind of thing at the time, but he's pulling it off. He's got enough land with natural beauty."

A new idea

When it was first suggested to Mr. Craig that he consider dense housing and a new-urbanism format, he told John Kessel of the city's planning department: "Not in my lifetime. Not in my children's lifetime."

Slowly, however, Mr. Craig accepted the notion that it just might work. He visited town centers that fostered such development.

Within several months, the two men were on the same page.

"It's a matter of understanding how to take a concept that's popular, but at the time was not necessarily so in Texas, and apply it locally," said Mr. Kessel, McKinney's executive director of development services.

"It was a matter of how do we achieve financial results for the community and for the developer?"

Mr. Craig also faced a slumping and uncertain economy. He was planning to open memberships for the golf club on Sept. 12, 2001, the day after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

"We rescheduled a week later, and planes still weren't flying. Then we postponed indefinitely. Postponed is one thing. Indefinitely is another, so there was the rumor mill that it wasn't going to happen," Mr. Craig said.

But he moved forward with his plans.

Work was progressing on the TPC at Craig Ranch, the PGA Tour-caliber, members-only golf course designed by Tom Weiskopf, a 15-time PGA Tour winner.

"He said to me, 'I'm not a golfer and I don't know anything about golf, so you are my guy,'" Mr. Weiskopf said.

"That told me he was going to allow me to do what I needed to do. It was a great piece of land, and I could see a tremendous golf course coming from it."

Watching 400,000 pounds of dirt getting pushed around and redistributed is different from seeing steel come out of the ground, so Mr. Craig still had no tangible proof that his project was working.

Arlington-based D.R. Horton was ready to begin building its dense residential community with a street layout that precluded dead ends and cul-de-sacs. But that wasn't enough to lure more projects.

"The struggle was to get people to believe that this was not a paper plan," Mr. Craig said. "We needed to get them to believe it would become a reality."

As the golf course was under construction, D.R. Horton's project was gaining momentum and division president Rick Horton - a former doubter - says the company has been overwhelmed with the demand.

Of the 1,400 lots on a tract called Craig Ranch North, he has sold 800 for home building and he says it could be 1,200 if the company didn't opt to build at a more reasonable pace.

Mr. Horton had a sign for townhomes on an eastern Craig Ranch location removed on the first day because his office could not field all the calls.

"At the time we bought Craig Ranch property, it was the single largest investment we made in Texas, and I questioned whether it was a solid investment," Mr. Horton said.

Key support

Through it all, Mr. Craig had the right backers - the city of McKinney and business partner Cecil Van Tuyl, co-owner of the Kansas-based mega auto dealer V.T. Inc.

In three separate deals, the city helped Mr. Craig recover some of his costs for road and utility work on land that had one water main when he first assembled it.

First, city and county officials approved \$8 million worth of assistance for roadwork while helping Mr. Craig secure a \$2.3 million grant from the North Texas Council of Governments.

Next, the city's community development agency, which is funded by sales tax, provided \$6.3 million to help with construction on a soccer and softball complex on 65 acres donated by Mr. Craig.

And this month Craig Ranch will receive \$3.25 million toward park, road and utility construction as part of a deal that will bring a Cooper Aerobics Center's first expansion - \$15 million worth - to McKinney.

Part of that deal included a \$1.85 million from the McKinney Economic Development Corp., another tax-supported entity that markets the city's business prospects and is led by president David Pitstick.

Mr. Pitstick also wanted to see results before he committed taxpayer funds.

"We can't be venture capitalists," Mr. Pitstick said. "That's not our job.

"But having the golf course and getting the Cooper clinic will give us national exposure and access to people who have resources to do all kinds of development."

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Caption:

PHOTO(S): 1-3 (Photos by JOHN DAVID EMMETT/Special Contributor) 1. The Craig Ranch golf course is built to PGA Tour standards and will soon be joined by a Cooper Aerobics Center facility. The mixed-use McKinney residential development is designed to be urban and pedestrian-friendly. 2. David Craig (center) takes a break after inspecting work on the ball fields at his McKinney development. 3. The players' clubhouse serves golfers playing a tour-caliber course designed by pro Tom Weiskopf. MAP(S): (BETSY BOCK/Staff Artist) Craig Ranch planned development

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Record Number: 219047467