

It Takes a Village

Mixed-use developments bring New Urbanism to next level, changing how we shop, play and stay
 Mixing It Up Developers are in the race to create high-end retail, entertainment and residential centers as the mixed-use movement sweeps across the Emerald Coast. Will the Village concept go the way of the mall or prove to be a cornerstone in the area's economic evolution?

By Anita Doberman

Village-style shopping and living centers are a hallmark of the Emerald Coast. The success and economic impact of these developments is rooted in the vision and innovations brought about by developers, merchants, architects and even social scientists.

The concept of modern, yet traditional, mixed-use villages falls under the title New Urbanism. Along the Emerald Coast, a number of communities founded on New Urbanist concepts have exploded in growth and popularity in recent years, placing the Emerald Coast at the forefront of innovative modern living.

Shining examples of New Urbanism in the area include Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort, The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Destin Commons, Rosemary Beach and Seaside, to name a few. All are home to local and national stores and offer snapshots of the different ways village-style developments have evolved.

Though these retail-residential communities differ, with some focusing strictly on tourism and others on a mix of residents and tourists, they all are based on the principle of combining working, living and entertainment within the same area.

This concept was first developed with the creation of Seaside, the prototype and archetype of New Urbanism. Located on Scenic Highway 30A in Walton County, Seaside was founded in 1981 by Robert and Daryl Davis to evoke the spirit of mid-20th-century America. It was the first modern development in which the entire town was intentionally planned to be within walking distance. Today, that experiment has paid off. Like most other village-style developments, Seaside has become a successful town and a tourist destination.

Village-style shopping centers in the area owe their success to a combination of interrelated factors. They have attracted national chains while benefiting local merchants and business owners, and have managed to draw both tourists and residents with innovative architecture and aesthetics that integrate the feel of the Emerald Coast. The result is a pleasant atmosphere that is comforting and unique, helping establish Northwest Florida as one of the up-and-coming vacation destinations in the United States.

Back to the Future

"Most visitors are attracted to a sense of connectedness and warm atmosphere they experience in the village-style developments," said Kathy Kemp, marketing director for the Rosemary Beach Town Center.

Rosemary Beach, like Seaside, is a perfect example of the New Urbanist vision. The roots of this movement go back even before the creation of Seaside in 1981. New Urbanism arose in the late 1970s and introduced the new idea of housing, working, shopping and entertainment, all enclosed in the same area, within walking distance. It aims at recreating a European town, or the best qualities of what American cities used to be like, while responding to present and future demands.

"It's not a step back but rather a step forward, in which the idea of working, living and playing is adapted to our modern sensibilities. New Urbanism rose in direct contrast to conventional suburban development, an idea that took hold of the country after World War II and led to our present suburbia, which is extremely dependent on cars.

The attraction of the town center's return has made the Emerald Coast's New Urbanist villages appealing to visitors and businesses alike, leading to satisfied customers and soaring profits.

John Heiser, vice president of the Walton County-based Howard Group, which has developed everything from upscale residential resort communities to landmark retail centers such as Silver Sands Factory Stores and Grand Boulevard at

Sandestin, agrees that we are going back to the way things used to be, with town centers, not malls.

“People are tired of commuting,” Heiser said. “Visitors and permanent residents of this area are buying and interacting within this environment for the convenience.

“You will see most downtown areas redeveloping into these village-type areas,” he said. “Most planning and development departments now almost require some scale of the village-based elements to be incorporated in new developments or redevelopments for the fact that it cuts the urban sprawl and positively impacts traffic and infrastructure.”

In addition, the architectural design and ambience that is created ensures that visitors, residents and businesses will have a positive experience and come back, or even establish roots.

The ability to create this atmosphere is as much part of the villages’ success as the businesses that keep them thriving.

Mary Kathryn Wells, director of marketing for the open-air regional lifestyle center Destin Commons, said that the center’s development team, Turnberry Associates, “carefully crafted the center’s design to be functional, yet to depict the architectural elements of the Emerald Coast region by way of roof lines and exterior details.”

Similarly, Heiser said that Grand Boulevard architects took great care in the details of that retail center.

While things can vary within the villages and can include a large living population or be limited to retail, office space, entertainment and restaurant services, they all display impressive and carefully coordinated architectural elements.

Bringing in the Big Boys

The unique and impressive building décor coexists with another aspect that is, in large part, responsible for the villages’ success: national chains.

“A large collection of top designers have continued moving into this area, beginning with the opening of Silver Sands Factory Stores 15 years ago, further helping the growth of local retail and business markets,” Heiser said.

Wells agreed, explaining that national retailers perform extremely well in the region.

“Eighty percent of Destin Commons’ tenant mix is made up of national tenants making their first appearance in the region,” she said. “There are cases where the national merchants in Destin Commons have been sales leaders within their chain on a nationwide basis.”

Grand Boulevard at Sandestin, which is less than 10 miles from Destin Commons on U.S. Highway 98, tells a similar story. The multimillion-dollar, open-air shopping center features two Marriott-brand hotels, as well as a central green space, and is home to national retailers and restaurants such as Victoria’s Secret, P.F. Chang’s China Bistro, Tommy Bahama’s Tropical Café and Emporium and Mitchell’s Fish Market. Some of them are making their debut in Northwest Florida at the town center.

Why do high-quality national chains keep coming to these villages? George Haskins, director of retail for the Orvis Company, said “the quality of the town center that has been developed was a major factor, as well as the significant tourist destination that the area and specifically Sandestin represents. The people who frequent the area and own second homes are clearly (within) Orvis’ demographics.”

Indeed, most national retailers were very satisfied with their experiences and have performed as projected or better on the Emerald Coast.

W.C. Wells, president of the restaurant division of Tommy Bahama at Grand Boulevard, said that the demographics of the Sandestin/South Walton County area qualified the location at Grand Boulevard for a Tommy Bahama compound (which includes both a restaurant and retail outlets). We never open a stand-alone restaurant. When we look to open a new compound ... we look for upscale resort communities and lifestyle centers. Wells noted that Northwest Florida has an increasing number of upscale visitors.

Boosting Local Businesses

This business mentality is shared by local merchants and store owners. In fact, the success of the village-style centers isn't based simply on national chains. Local business owners have attracted just as much business as the larger establishments.

As Rebecca Job, director of commercial property at The Market Shops at Sandestin, explained, part of the attraction of the area comes from the unique and diverse mix of "local mom and pop" businesses that have a niche. They are not big-box retailers, and they offer items that you can't just get anywhere.

Lisa McKee, owner of Hugs and Hissy Fits in Destin Commons, said that "while every mall across the U.S. has the national chains, when visitors come to Destin Commons, they not only get the best of the chains, they also get the best of the locally owned shops. It makes us feel good (that) we have impressed folks from all over so much that they plan a day at Destin Commons because of our shop."

The same is true for local boutiques, stores and restaurants at The Village at Baytowne Wharf at Sandestin. It was developed by Intrawest Corporation, the largest operator and developer of village-centered resorts in North America and owner of some of the most-requested resort and conference center destinations.

Seaside and Rosemary Beach, along with other developments along Highway 30A, including leading Florida land developer St. Joe's WaterColor, offer visitors the experience of living in a true New Urbanist community. There are no national chain stores (though a Starbucks coffee shop is allowed), and local retail merchants have performed very well ever since they opened their stores.

And it's not just during the summer, but all year round," said Wells, of Tommy Bahama. More people are coming down in the fall and winter for wine festivals, art exhibits and theater performances.

Coming to Seaside allows people to experience the town and relaxed atmosphere without worries.

"Seaside is relaxed, perhaps slightly funky," said Phyllis Bleiweis, executive director of the Seaside Institute in Santa Rosa Beach. "Families are having fun without a whole lot of worry."

New Urbanism, New Challenges

Building village-style centers isn't a simple task, and developers have had to overcome obstacles.

Heiser, of the Howard Group, explained that village-style retail centers aren't as efficient to build as an enclosed mall.

"One of the major obstacles in the development of villages is that they require more capital investments and are much more expensive to develop because you are creating a larger footprint rather than a vertical stacking concept at a mall," he said. Heiser added that the design of these centers also is much more critical because it plays a key role in the atmosphere it creates, and developers must deal carefully with an abundance of landscape. Grand Boulevard continued with this idea when it built its hotels.

There also are many demographic groups to appeal to with the village-style developments. Some visitors come to play, others to shop or dine, so there are more elements to balance than with a mall, where there is one primary demographic — the shopper. In addition, many people are looking toward these developments as a place to open offices and even reside.

Such developments start out slowly.

"You don't birth even a small town in the first years," said Jon Ervin, manager of the Cottage Rental Agency in Seaside, adding that today, almost 90 percent of the development's homes are available for rent.

In fact, Destin Commons currently is furthering its town-center approach as national residential developer Turnberry Ltd. begins construction on Turnberry Harbour, featuring a luxury condominium community adjacent to the shopping complex. And Grand Boulevard will continue its mixed-use efforts by eventually introducing more lodging space.

Village-style shopping centers have helped the local economy in many ways. The mixed-use meccas have attracted national chain stores, state-of-the-art facilities and resorts while allowing local retailers and store owners to flourish. They also have introduced the concept of "live, work, play and stay" in the same space, which, although derived from a decades-old ideal, has been adapted to our modern necessities and has helped shape a progressive and growing Emerald Coast. New Urbanism's Birthplace Seaside's Unique Concept is Deeply Rooted in the Emerald Coast's Evolution

By Anita Doberman

Seaside was founded in 1981 by Robert S. and Daryl Rose Davis, with help from Miami architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. The town has enjoyed tremendous success since its inception. It wasn't an overnight sensation, but rather the result of hard work, sound economic initiatives and business practices that remained true to the New Urbanist vision, in which living, working and playing all would be within walking distance.

Seaside has withstood the test of time by successfully integrating tourism, businesses and merchants within its New Urbanist framework. It also has grown gradually, taking the time to expand and build while following the Davises' vision.

Robert Davis said Seaside planners were careful to develop slowly.

"For the first several years, property sold at small premiums, and only a handful of properties sold each year," she said. "Even after sales picked up, we limited them to about 20 lots each year so that our small staff could review plans and monitor construction," thus making sure Seaside remained true to its vision.

Careful planning and hard work paid off. Seaside has been recognized with numerous awards and depicted in magazines, newspapers, and even in the movie "The Truman Show" as the classic example of New Urbanism.

Jon Irving, property manager of the Seaside Cottage Rental Agency, identifies other secrets to Seaside's success: "Location, people and quality," he said. "I'm not giving anything away, am I? It really does boil down to that for any endeavor. In our case, the dedication over decades may be the difference."

Walking along Seaside's small roads, one sees a place where beauty and practicality merge, and where the human dimension of life dictates the pace of businesses and its growth, rather than the other way around. It is no wonder, then, that tourists and return visitors alike cannot get enough of the dream town after being granted a peek.

Irving said merchants, restaurant owners and others who are somehow affiliated with Seaside almost always have been successful.

Davis added that property owners in the town understand the value of tourism and "recognize that the variety of shops, restaurants, cultural activities, services, etc., would be difficult to sustain without the vacation rentals. Many owners can afford their houses in Seaside because it has a successful vacation rental program."

Seaside's influence extends not only locally but also beyond Florida, to the rest of the United States, as the model

for a true New Urbanist community, Davis said.

Building ParadiseNuts and bolts with Howard Group's Keith Howard

Keith Howard, the man behind the creation of several village-style developments, including the recently opened multimillion-dollar Grand Boulevard in Miramar Beach, has impressive credentials and a breadth of knowledge to share through his successes. Howard, a native of Pell City, Ala., began his career in real estate when he was only 19 years old. He moved to Destin in 1981 and, after several successful business enterprises, founded Howard Group in 1987.

Howard recently took time to share his thoughts about town-center developments in Northwest Florida with Emerald Coast Magazine writer Anita Doberman.

How are town-center style shopping developments influencing the Emerald Coast?

Along the Emerald Coast, you will find more examples of these town-center shopping centers at different levels of critical mass. The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Seaside and Grand Boulevard are all examples of different, yet successful, town-center style shopping centers existing within a single marketplace.

There has been a decrease in the development of traditional strip centers and an increase in the town-center models because the sophisticated communities in this area are evolving to the town-center format. Town centers are well received by the community and much more successful for retailers. Retailers are flourishing in these true town centers, such as Grand Boulevard, that include retail, dining, lodging, office and public spaces.

What is the major obstacle in developing these town centers?

One of the major obstacles is the assemblage of both real estate and entitlements necessary to create the critical mass to become a regional or national destination. It's critical to do this to persuade businesses to come to Grand Boulevard.

Another obstacle is convincing these regional and national tenants that the demographics in this area and their ability to spend money in this marketplace can and will support their respective concepts, whether it be retail, lodging, restaurants or corporate offices.

What is your vision for the town center – specifically to Grand Boulevard? Can you explain how you envision it for the community?

The vision behind Grand Boulevard is to primarily be a major vacation destination from not only a local and regional perspective but a national perspective. We want to foster and promote businesses on a regional and national level. For example, we are currently leasing office space to regional firms and are now seeking office tenants who originate in major metro markets such as New York. All of this garners regional and national attention for Grand Boulevard and this area as not only a vacation destination, but also a vital business destination.

At the end of the day, Grand Boulevard serves as a vibrant commerce center for all of Northwest Florida, which is gaining and will continue to gain national attention. Grand Boulevard also is designed to meet the needs of the local community, offering new choices for lodging, dining, shopping and entertainment. With the addition of nearby, high-quality medical facilities, great schools and an international airport, Grand Boulevard and this area are on track to become a year-round destination within the next five years.

New Airport Passes Final Hurdle in Relocation

The Bay County Airport and Industrial District recently approved a contract to sell the Panama City – Bay County International Airport to a subsidiary of Leucadia National Corporation of New York (NYSE: LUK) for \$56.5 million plus transfer fees. The approval is considered to be a final step in plans to relocate the airport to northwestern Bay County. The Airport Authority anticipates that it will complete the new facility in late 2009 or early 2010. Leucadia, a diversified holding company, developed Rosemary Beach and Draper Lake in Northwest Florida.

Alys Beach recently unveiled a new resource center, offering an interactive exploration of the founding of the upscale residential development on the east end of Highway 30A, as well as a state-of-the-art cultural and educational exhibit.

Broker Hunter Harmon and Realtors John David Sullivan and Price Rainer opened the doors to Beach Properties of Florida this fall. The firm, located in Grayton Beach, will specialize in residential real estate in the 30A community.

Destin-based Legendary Inc. announced recently that Camellia Grill, a New Orleans landmark restaurant, will open in the real estate development and hospitality company's newest project, HarborWalk Village, located in the Destin Harbor. The restaurant is expected to open in May 2008.

Officials with Camp Creek Golf Club at the development of WaterSound in South Walton County announced that the Tom Fazio-designed course, developed by Florida land developer St. Joe Co. (NYSE: JOE), has been selected by the United States Golf Association and the Florida State Golf Association to host the sectional qualifier of the U.S. Amateur Championship in July 2008.

Howard Group continues to grow its two Walton County developments with new retail, food and beverage outlets. The Destin-based company's Silver Sands Factory Stores has opened a Panera Bread restaurant and its Grand Boulevard at Sandestin town center opened Fusion Spa Salon Aveda, Lee's Spa & Nails, Gallery Nu Fine Arts and P.F. Chang's China Bistro.

In other news, asquared events Inc. received three Gold awards at the International Festivals & Events Association's 52nd Annual Convention & Expo this fall. The Destin-based event marketing consulting and production company, co-owned by Adam Shiland and Abby Jordison, also won a first-place award from the Florida Festivals & Events Association for best brochure for the 21st Annual Sandestin Wine Festival at Baytowne Wharf and was selected as a runner-up for the Fifth Annual Baytowne Film Festival Poster … Silver Sands Factory Stores's marketing team was presented with the Award of Distinction from the local Florida Public Relations chapter in recognition of the shopping center's 2006 Autumn Tides Month promotion. Silver Sands also won the Judge's Award at the Florida Public Relations Association's Golden Image Awards state competition for "an outstanding entry that achieves maximum results on minimum budget … The Beaches of South Walton recently received the Blue Wave Certification from The Clean Beaches Council for the seventh straight year. The distinction includes 14 beach communities in southern Walton County and three state parks. The Beaches of South Walton Tourist Development Council also received an Award of Distinction from the Florida Public Relations Association for its Beach Safety Campaign … Inc. Magazine named Dennis Lichorwic, DMD to its "5,000 Fastest-Growing Businesses." Lichorwic, president and founder of Destin Center for Cosmetic Dentistry, was ranked No. 3,165. – Compiled by Lori Hutzler Eckert