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Tiny town of Fulshear gets ready as Houston sprawl nears

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FULSHEAR -- Readers of a local newsletter this month learned of the birth of twins to a young couple, clipped and saved a schedule of upcoming Women's Club meetings and received an invitation to the Waggin' Tails Pet Ranch.

Major news events they are not, but they resonate in Fulshear, population 716, a town that clings tightly to its rural traditions and down-home values. Preserving these qualities, though, is likely to grow more difficult as large new housing developments march steadily westward to Fulshear's doorstep and over the threshold.

The surge of development, including one project planning 6,000 homes, promises to transform this sleepy hamlet into the metropolitan area's next major growth center, with a population that reaches 40,000 or more over the next 10 to 15 years.

While the timetable could change because of the national credit crisis, the rapid urbanization of Fulshear could rival that of another Fort Bend County town, Sugar Land, whose population increased from about 4,000 in 1980 to about 80,000 today.

Fulshear's elected leaders are embracing the prospect of growth, but some longtime residents are ambivalent at best.

"A lot of people say they love the small-town feel, but then they ask, 'Why don't we have a grocery store?' " said Joe Dozier, 62, a lifelong resident whose family once owned a local barbecue joint that still bears his name.

Fulshear's leaders have seen the growth coming for years and have been busy preparing for it, adopting regulatory ordinances unusual for such a small town. These measures include sign restrictions, a major thoroughfare plan and an updated subdivision ordinance.

Preservation of the town's small-town feel has been a cornerstone of these efforts. This goal has been assisted by adjoining landowners who petitioned to be in Fulshear's extraterritorial jurisdiction -- the area subject to annexation -- rather than Houston's.

"A lot of people moved out to Fulshear for the country life, the big lots, the openness," said Tommy Kuykendall, chairman of the town's planning commission. "Houston is an urban concrete jungle -- that's the perception. But the two worlds are coming together very rapidly."

Six housing developments, totaling more than 14,000 homes, are planned

or under way in Fulshear or its extraterritorial jurisdiction.

Assuming an average of three people per household -- a figure recommended by Texas State Demographer Karl Eschbach that accounts for likely vacancies -- these projects alone would add 42,000 people to Fulshear's population by 2020, when all are scheduled to be completed.

Could surpass Sugar Land

Mayor James W. Roberts predicted even higher levels of growth, saying Fulshear could surpass Sugar Land as the county's largest city in 20 to 25 years.

The town's government will be challenged to provide services to all the new residents as its population takes a "quantum leap," said Fort Bend County Judge Bob Hebert.

In some ways, Fulshear is well-positioned for this growth. The town is close to the Energy Corridor, a burgeoning job center where expanding oil and gas companies and commercial developers are adding more than 3 million square feet of office space.

The Westpark Tollway, which stops just a few miles east of Fulshear, provides access to the Galleria area and other destinations in Houston.

Shopping options in Fulshear are limited to stores that sell staples, but the Fulshear Town Center, a 16,000-square-foot office and retail center that opened a few years ago, has the capacity to more than double in size, said its developer, Doug Konopka, the president of DHK Development.

Some planners and transportation experts, however, said local leaders must act now, while many new developments are in early stages, to ensure they are adequately connected to one another and include destinations other than just houses.

Otherwise, they said, residents will have to drive long distances on clogged roads for routine daily tasks, degrading their quality of life.

Alan Clark, transportation planning manager for the Houston-Galveston Area Council, said he has seen plans for some of the developments and is concerned that they may not provide enough connections other than FM 1093, an extension of Westheimer that's the main thoroughfare in the area.

"It could create a 1960-type scenario on 1093," Clark said, referring to FM 1960, a congested north Harris County highway that provides the sole access for numerous neighborhoods where home values are declining.

Fulshear officials said they were taking steps to manage the impending growth. The town has enlisted H-GAC and a graduate student to develop a

master plan that should be presented to the City Council next year, said Cheryl Stalinsky, Fulshear's economic development director.

Kuykendall, the planning commission chairman, said the town hasn't ruled out a zoning ordinance if growth patterns indicate such rules are needed.

"We're definitely aware that we could get run over with development," he said.

The new developments in Fulshear and its extraterritorial jurisdiction each have their own plans, which feature a range of amenities in addition to houses.

The largest project, Cross Creek Ranch, will include a resort-style swimming pool and exercise facilities, a community center and a restaurant.

"If you come out here, you can't just build houses," said Will Holder, president of Trendmaker Homes, the developer.

Large tracts of land in many of the new developments have been set aside for nature trails and other outdoor amenities, and the developers are paying a \$450-per-lot fee to Fulshear to develop a regional park.

Downtown Fulshear, which still has the rustic look of many small town centers, has added a few cosmopolitan touches and should grow increasingly sophisticated, developers said.

Dining options, for example, range from fast food and barbecue at Dozier's to Ray's Grill, a white-tablecloth restaurant in the town center.

A 'new downtown'

Konopka's development company has begun a nearby residential project. He's setting aside the northernmost 30 acres of the development, Fulshear Creek Crossing, for a "new downtown" with a public square, a new City Hall and space for a European-style transit station in the event that commuter rail comes to Fulshear, as its leaders hope.

All of these plans, of course, could be affected by the economic downturn and credit crisis gripping the nation.

Konopka said the economic problems could delay his plans to finish Fulshear Creek Crossing in eight years. The company just finished developing 123 lots in the project's first phase.

Konopka has seen a slowdown in sales at Fulbrook, another nearby development, where homes sell for between \$700,000 and \$1 million. Recent declines in the stock market are causing some consumers to put

off buying, he said.