

\$40M housing project set

Dripping Springs promotes open space

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A development that will sprout 912 homes just west of Dripping Springs will mark the town's first test of a new law aimed at preserving the area's rolling open space and panoramic views.

The \$40 million community, planned by Central Texas developer James Kerby, will sit at the corner of U.S. Highway 290 and McGregor Lane. Comprising 688 acres, the development will leave almost 70 percent of that land open. Plans call for clustered sets of houses — more than four an acre — tucked into the land's topography.

Proponents of the building style, called conservation development, say it maintains natural environment while also helping developers turn a profit. Dripping Springs passed its conservation development ordinance last year, and Travis County is considering development rules to encourage similar construction.

Detractors say that such an approach to development still perpetuates sprawl, and without government incentives, some wonder whether market forces will prompt developers to adopt the unique style.

For Kerby, who owns Kerby Development LLC, conservation development marks a good marriage between a developer's bottom line and a community's interest.

"It allows a developer to develop a product that he feels he can sell," Kerby says. "At the same time, it doesn't offend all the landowners around you."

Kerby has had the land under contract for about seven months. The sale is set to close in the next two months. Kerby expects to break ground around February, with the first lots on the ground by this time next year. Phases of the project will extend over the next seven years, he says.

Though Kerby has just started talking with homebuilders, he expects house prices to start at \$300,000. The homeowners will

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James Kerby

Owner

Kerby Development LLC

jointly own the more than 450 acres of open space, with each house backing up to a large tract of land. Fence restrictions will preserve those bucolic views, Kerby says.

"You're not looking at a lot of wood fences," he says. "Everyone will be looking out their door at several hundred acres that they all own."

That's an amenity that could help distinguish the project — dubbed Scenic Greens — from its neighbors.

Steve Windhager, director of landscape restoration at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, says such developments can promote their open space much like a golf community sells its course to potential customers. But conservation developers don't have the hassle and costs of building an actual golf course.

"When you moved out to the country, what you really moved out there for was a feeling of wide-open spaces," Windhager says. "But you don't get that if the land is chopped up into one-acre lots."

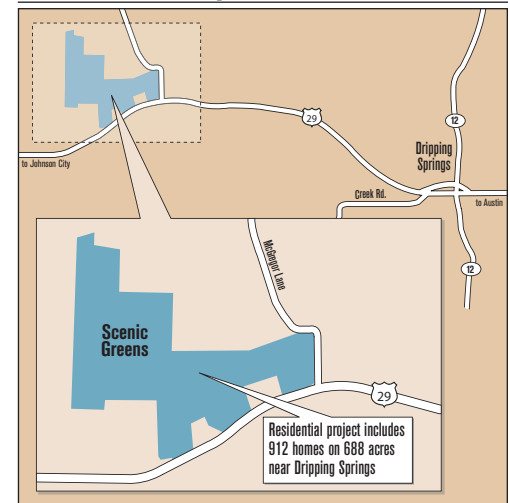
He points to another Dripping Springs development by Terry Mitchell of Momark Development LLC. That community is also using the conservation development model, though it began before the ordinance was in effect. Still, Mitchell expects to save as much as 30 percent in infrastructure costs because of clustered housing, Windhager says.

Plus, in other states, such developments



Windhager

SCENIC GREENS



have sold faster at premium prices, he adds. The Wildflower Center is hosting a forum on conservation development on Aug. 31 and Sept. 1, aimed at everyone from architects and developers to real estate brokers and tax appraisers.

Scenic Greens could have gone in a different direction, says Jon Thompson, development coordinator for the City of Dripping Springs. Several years ago, KB Home owned a chunk of the land and even ran a water line out to the site. But after facing opposition from Dripping Springs residents, the homebuilder dropped the project, Thompson says.

The relatively low price of land, combined with the water lines and proximity to Dripping Springs, made it ripe for other developers, he adds. With its city-sized lots and mature trees serving as screens, drivers won't see much of the development from U.S. 290, he says.

The region is "going to grow — it's been proven," Thompson says. "What we're trying to get people to realize is that with growth, you can manage it or not manage it, and we're trying to manage it the best we can."