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Looking to the future

Sarasota developer Stephen Weeks has his sights on a storm-safe, environmentally friendly, deed restricted

By [Patrick Whittle](#)

PUNTA GORDA — Stephen Weeks sees a sparsely populated two-mile stretch of road between Punta Gorda and Fort Myers and envisions a sprawling, modern community that can stand up to any hurricane.

The Sarasota developer is the driving force behind the planned Enclaves of Notre Dame.

Weeks and about a dozen investors have bought 23 lots around Notre Dame Boulevard, five miles south of downtown Punta Gorda in rural south Charlotte County. Their intent is to build what could be described as not-your-father's deed restricted community.

The homes, mostly 1,800- to 2,200-square-foot three-bedroom units priced from \$300,000 to \$450,000, will be environmentally sound, energy-efficient and hurricane-resistant, Weeks says.

Two homes are under construction, and 11 others are on the way. There are about 1,000 empty lots around Notre Dame Boulevard, and Weeks hopes the construction in the area will attract more investors and expand the project.

So far, more than 40 people have contacted Weeks to express interest. No one was less surprised about all the inquiries than Weeks, a 40-year Sarasota resident who oversees development of Enclaves of Notre Dame as a full-time job.

"I knew the growth would come to Punta Gorda. Some people said it's an hour away; it's too far to drive; is anyone gonna come down here?" he says. "Well, Punta Gorda is a waterfront community."

Weeks sees his project as an alternative to high-priced communities such as nearby Burnt Store Isles and Punta Gorda Isles.

He believes Enclaves of Notre Dame will fill a pressing need that Hurricane Charley left in the county: affordable, sturdy, environmentally-friendly housing for retirees and families.

The homes will be built to current hurricane standards, and buyers will be able to choose from additions like safe rooms and removable storm shutters. The community will also have a Florida House, a model home that displays environmentally sound features.

Eco-Smart, a Sarasota company that sells disaster-resistant and environmentally friendly construction supplies, is contracted to provide some of the materials for the homes.

Matt Ross, president Eco-Smart, said the homes will have features like solar pool-heating deck tiles, non-toxic paint, bamboo floors and impact-resistant windows. Buyers will be able to choose from other interior options.

The weakest points of the homes — the roofs and windows — will be resistant to at least 150 mph winds, Ross said. The walls will be able to resist up to 250 mph winds, he said.

"The base house that he is building will be 70 percent more energy-efficient than the average home in Florida," Ross said. "There are some fringe benefits beyond just lower utility bills."

The community's deed restrictions, which will be similar to those of typical subdivisions, will keep their values high, Weeks said.

There are some homeowners already living in the area. Weeks said he will give them the opportunity to join the deed-restricted community, but they will have to adhere to its restrictions.

In other words, "We're trying to make this like a community ... with no crap in the yard," Weeks said.

Some nearby residents aren't keen on that.

After a story about Weeks' plan ran in the Herald-Tribune in August, one anonymous e-mailer suggested that Weeks "stay in Sarasota with all the other rich snobs."

"Three-hundred thousand is not an affordable home, and if I own my property and I make the payments I will proudly display my motorhome and my four-wheelers," the e-mailer added.

One of Weeks' troop of investors, Osprey resident Lester Kolodny, disagreed. A deed-restricted community is the best way to protect property values in the area, which have shot up over the past few years, he said.

Kolodny visited the site on a September morning to check on the status of building. Kolodny, surveying the neighborhood's vacant lots and empty streets, said he believes the neighborhood can blossom.

"It's an upcoming area. And there's a need for housing here because of" Hurricane Charley, he said.

Though 56-year-old Weeks loves to talk about the marketability of the Notre Dame neighborhood, he breaks from the typical developer stereotype in many ways.

He originally planned a career in public relations, but withdrew from a program at the University of South Florida. His formal education ended after he earned an associate degree at a community college, which he completed "in '75 or something."

After 20 years as a landscaping and irrigation contractor, he made the move into real estate about four years ago. After years of working for developers, he decided to become one.

Weeks oozes confidence in his development projects, but liberally refers to his wife, Kim, a retired surgeon, as the brains of his marriage.

He manages a Sarasota youth athletic league called Suncoast Sports Club, and carries a cell phone with him when he looks at property so he can communicate with league members' parents.

While he makes his living in the competitive Florida real estate industry, he stresses that his sports league doesn't keep score "and there's no yelling or screaming at the children."

Even so, Weeks is adamant about the importance of strictly enforced deed restrictions in his new community.

Interest in the Enclaves so far has come from homeowners in Punta Gorda Isles, Port Charlotte and south of Punta Gorda, Weeks said.

He is sure more will follow.

"I just want a neighborhood. Sometimes the motivation isn't just profit. There's a housing need."
