

## Developers, homebuyers are bringing Western trend of planned mini-cities to wide-open spaces of rural Ada County

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When Paul and Susie Headlee decided to move to Idaho from Alaska six years ago, they knew they wanted to live in a planned community. At the time, the Boise area had one planned community — Hidden Springs in the Foothills northwest of Boise. The Headlees visited Hidden Springs, liked what they saw, and moved in.

"Living in a planned community wasn't just about purchasing a home — it was a lifestyle choice for us," Susie Headlee said. "Hidden Springs was the only planned community that we knew of in Idaho. We were particularly interested in this planned community because of its founding principles, which include an emphasis on open space, trails, agriculture and environmental education."

Tracy L'Herisson put her name on a waiting list earlier this year for a home in a planned community not yet under construction. She plans to leave her custom home on five acres in Eagle to move to a new home in Avimor, an 830-acre planned community nestled against the Foothills off Idaho 55. It will be a couple of years before her home can be built.

The Headlees and L'Herisson are at the forefront of trend that has been sweeping the West for decades, but is just now making an appearance in Idaho. In the six years since the Headlees moved to the area's only planned community, developers have begun work on about 20 planned community proposals in Ada County.

The nation's five fastest-growing states are in the West — Nevada, Arizona, Idaho, Utah and Colorado. Planned communities — mini-cities built from scratch — are one of the most popular kind of developments in four of those states, but not in Idaho ... yet.

About a decade ago only 5 percent of new housing was in planned communities. Last year, 20 percent of new housing in the U.S. was in planned communities.

In Phoenix, 65 percent of new housing was in planned communities, according to Gerry Armstrong, Ada County Development Services director.

"You can see how far behind the curve we are," Armstrong said.

Idaho will not be behind the curve for long. Developers have set their sights on rural Ada County, with its sagebrush sea, quiet locales and scenic views, as the ideal place for planned communities. In the last couple of years, Ada County Development Services has seen a marked increase in developers wanting to submit planned community applications. The county went from processing two such applications in the past 10 years to juggling five applications so far this year alone, Armstrong said.

The county's first planned community, Hidden Springs, was approved in 1997 as a 1,035-home, 1,844-acre community with a nature conservation theme, to help preserve the environment and encourage wildlife-friendly yards. Today, about 500 homes have been built as well as a post office, charter school, office and retail buildings, and an organic community garden.

Avimor, the second planned community in rural Ada County (Harris Ranch is located within Boise city limits), was approved earlier this year. The 684-home, 830-acre community off Idaho 55 is adjacent to public land and will feature an extensive trail system. The developer plans to start building homes this spring. Construction will take about five years.

The county is poised to decide on a third planned community in the next couple of months. The Cliffs is a 1,350-home, 707-acre development with a nature conservation theme to be built atop Hammer Flat overlooking the Boise River east of Boise.

### **What is a planned community**

A planned community, also called master-planned community, is a large-scale development featuring a wide range of housing prices and styles, a mix of commercial uses and an array of amenities including trails, parks, open space and recreational facilities. They characteristically emphasize social and local community

services such as schools, community centers, libraries, worship sites and other public land uses.

Southern California's Irvine Ranch is one of the oldest and largest planned communities in the U.S. Started in the 1960s, the 93,000-acre community is home to about 230,000 people. More than half of its acreage is permanently preserved as open space and parks.

The philosophy behind planned communities is sometimes called "cradle to grave" or "stroller to walker" because the communities are designed to accommodate young single people, families and retirees. As people's housing needs change, they can remain in the same neighborhood or village. Also, several generations can live near each other.

"Master-planned communities have always been popular. Most well-executed (planned communities) are able to offer a lifestyle and sense of community that you can't get from a conventional subdivision," Neal Tsay, a vice president of Robert Charles Lesser, a national company that tracks the industry for developers, said.

Planned communities also offer residents certainty, according to Jim Heid, a national planned community expert. Residents can look at the master plan and know where schools, parks and retail centers will be. If someone moves into a subdivision adjacent to empty land, the homeowner has no guarantees as to what could be built next their subdivision, Heid said. Residents also have no guarantees whether the city will provide parks nearby or whether trails that cross private land will remain open.

The primary focus of a development's planning effort is to create a particular environment, a sense of place. Some planned communities have themes — golf, tennis, equestrian, nature conservation or active seniors — providing residents a common bond with their neighbors.

The Headlees say Hidden Springs is meeting their expectations of what a planned community should offer.

"We love the sense of community that living here brings. It is a very easy place to meet your neighbors and make new friends," Paul said. "Besides the emphasis on open space and the environment, the community provides many social activities in a pedestrian-friendly environment."

The Headlees also like knowing what Hidden Springs future development will look like because certain architectural styles and landscaping are allowed.

The planned community lifestyle is not for everyone. The developments often have detailed guidelines for architecture and landscaping and strict covenants, codes and restrictions.

Laurie Barrera, a relocation specialist for SelEquity Real Estate, said she receives requests from both people who want the consistency of a regulated development and people who want fewer restrictions on their property. For instance, they may want to build a shop or other outbuilding or install a certain type of landscaping, such as xeriscaping, which may not be allowed in some subdivisions or planned communities.

"Some people don't mind strict (covenants, codes and restrictions) because they know what to expect; other people want more flexibility," Barrera said.

### **Lure of open space**

Open space is important to L'Herisson. After careful consideration, she has decided living in a planned community can guarantee her access to open space more so than her rural home.

"When I move to Avimor, I will have thousands of acres right outside my door," L'Herisson said.

Land surrounding her rural 5-acre retreat is being sold. Gates and no-trespassing signs indicate the intentions of the developers or new owners, she said. Her regular walks have become shorter, her routes fewer.

"We can no longer live like we used to live here," L'Herisson said, freely walking or riding across their neighbors' land — honoring an unwritten agreement that even though it was private land, people could access it as long as they respected it.

She has lived on a farm or large multi-acre lots all her life. She likes the privacy and freedom to roam and wander the land. She knows the value of open space, and for suburban expansion she is a supporter of planned communities — mini-cities build on large tracts of land.

As more homes go up, open space disappears. L'Herisson thinks planned communities are a solution to this dilemma because homes are built in clusters with open space around them and the open space can never be developed, guaranteeing residents and the public the freedom to roam.

"I am avidly opposed to development of Idaho land in general, but when suburban sprawl starts to eat away at the West's open spaces that is where I am fully behind planned communities with a lot of open space preserved," L'Herisson said. "Humans need this contact with uncultivated, unpruned and natural land."

More than 60 percent of Avimor's 830 acres will remain open, natural space. The site borders several thousand acres of public land on one side and Hidden Springs planned community on another, which has its own trail and open space system.

### **Making them work**

Planned communities in Ada County aren't without controversy. Ada County has its own planned community ordinance, as do Boise and Eagle.

Cities are concerned that remotely-located planned communities will strain their already limited resources. Boise Mayor Dave Bieter has said he supports planned communities, but with a caveat: He does not support planned communities away from cities or transportation corridors or in the Foothills or other environmentally sensitive areas.

Proponents say private land is going to be developed anyway, and a 1,000-acre planned community is more comprehensive than a patchwork of 10 hundred-acre subdivisions.

In Ada County, the planned community ordinance requires wildlife and traffic plans, and at least 20 percent of the land needs to be open space or parks. The county also requires developers to provide for sewer, water, fire protection, parks and school sites. Developers also must pay for a percentage of the cost to provide law enforcement and other services, such as school busing to the area, until tax revenue from new residents goes into the tax rolls.

According to Ada County's planned community ordinance, a development must "demonstrate that its utilities and services are self-supporting and not subsidized by residents living outside the community."

The county insists planned communities can be self-supporting and requires each developer to prove it on paper. But without a fully built-out planned community in Ada County to analyze, it is too soon to determine whether a planned community can be totally self-supporting.

Whether the Treasure Valley can sustain a dozen or more planned communities is not known. The Valley's population is expected to reach 1 million by 2027, but the market can be fickle.

"As long as planned communities are able to differentiate themselves from one another and know who their markets are and what their market position is, Boise could sustain a number of concurrently selling planned communities," Tsay said