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## AMPLE AMENITIES

## Self-Contained Communities Come With Careful Planning And Lots of Local Character

By Julie Bennett

Letitia Frye lived in New York City and San Francisco before finding her own "slice of heaven" in DC Ranch, a master-planned community nestled in the foothills of the McDowell Mountain Range in Scottsdale, Arizona.

"DC Ranch is so beautiful, and so full of activities," she says, "I feel like I'm living in a Four Seasons resort. Our neighbors are diverse, successful young families who also moved here from all over the country." Mrs. Frye, whose previous career was in public relations and marketing, even opened a children's clothing boutique on Market Street, in the community's exclusive retail center. "In keeping with the paradise theme," she says, "I named it Little Angels."

Developers are creating dozens of similar paradises all over the Phoenix-Tucson area. While suburbs in other states grow up piecemeal, with builders putting up houses individually or in small subdivisions, the open spaces in Arizona allow developers there to buy up vast tracts of land at one time and design entire self-contained communities, with thousands of houses served by their own parks, shopping districts and schools.

Often, these planned communities are designed around a central amenity or theme. Just half an hour north of downtown Phoenix, for example, is Tramonto, named after the Italian word for sunset, where neighborhoods have names like Terricina and Cielo and the central marketplace is designed to look like a village in Tuscany. Gladden Farms, in the town of Marana, near Tucson, includes real orchards in its parks. And DC Ranch was a working cattle ranch so recently that when resident John Herrickson played on the community's golf course for the first time, "there were two Texas steers on the fairway," he says.

DMB Inc. of Scottsdale, the developer of DC Ranch, plays up the ranch theme, modeling the retail area after a frontier town. But the real theme of this and other planned developments is the community itself.

Brent Herrington, DMB senior vice president, says: "When you have the ability to control a relatively large piece of land and can envision community planning in a comprehensive way, you are able to deliver a complete environment that's more pleasing and more thorough in its consideration of places where people live, work, shop, play, go to school and go to church. We've planned 12 communities (seven are in Arizona, the others are in California, Hawaii and Utah) and we've approached each thinking about

the character of a community that would make sense for that area."

Once DMB sets the tone, installs the infrastructure and lays out design criteria for houses and commercial buildings, they invite in area builders to fashion their vision into real structures. "We create opportunities for a broad spectrum of home building companies," Mr. Herrington says, "to create a variety of housing prices and, ultimately, a diverse community, so that a teacher, for example, can live in the same neighborhood as her students." In DC Ranch, prices range from \$300,000 to several million dollars for large custom homes; in Tramonto, developed by Communities Southwest, 1,500-square-foot houses start at about \$150,000 and custom homes cost \$400,000 or more.

DMB tries to lease space in its retail centers only to special restaurants and shops, like Little Angels, and insists that parks be within walking distance of all neighborhoods.

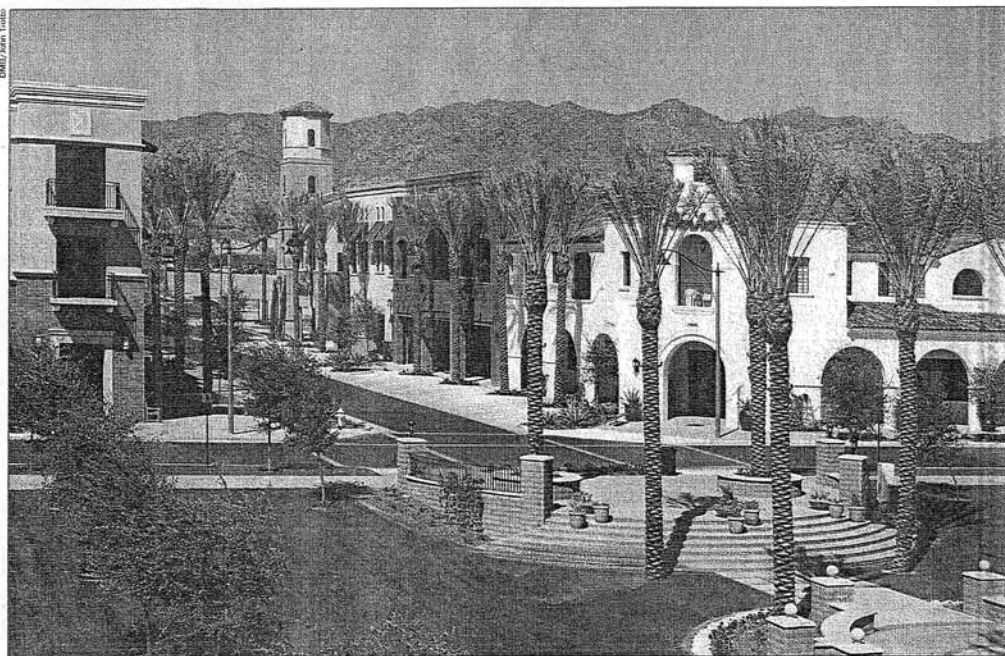
All master-planned communities have basic amenities, like walking trails, swimming pools, clubhouses, tennis courts and golf courses. Anthem, the community the Del Webb division of Pulte Homes is building northwest of Phoenix, even includes a three-story rock-climbing wall, water and skate-board parks and its own railroad. All developers provide the land, and often some of the funding, for schools to be built within their communities and usually put up fire and police stations that match the prevailing architectural style.

But it's the lifestyle that's really important. "We want to create a genuine small town," Mr. Herrington says, "with so much outdoor pedestrian activity that people have spontaneous interactions."

It was that sense of community that drew John Herrickson and his wife, Robbi, to DC Ranch after living all over the world in their roles as executives for IBM. "For the first time in our lives, we could select the place where we wanted to live," says Mrs. Herrickson. "We love that houses here have front porches and that everyone, no matter what their ages, interacts with each other."

City officials also love master-planned communities, says Dr. Jay Butler, director of the Arizona Real Estate Center of Arizona State University in Mesa,

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Verrado, a planned community west of Phoenix, will eventually offer 14,000 homes.

because they allow the developer and the city to negotiate exactly what goes onto a site. And working with larger tracts means that developers can preserve more open space and natural beauty. The Vistancia planned community under development by Sunbelt Holdings and Shea Homes in the Phoenix suburb of Peoria, for example, includes over 1,000 acres of open space, with miles of walking trails through desert landscapes. Planned communities are a good way to develop, according to Dr. Butler.

They are also good value. "If you move into a place that has nice features and a strong homeowners' association to maintain them, your home should sustain its value over time better than a tract house in a regular subdivision, Dr. Butler says.

If anything, home prices in popular planned communities are rising too fast, excluding the diverse populations developers say they want. Melissa Campos says she and her husband, Kyle, paid \$246,000 for a two-story Spanish colonial-style house in Verrado, a DMB planned community going up west of Phoenix. "It's now worth \$320,000," she says, "and it's not even finished."

Forty-four percent of Verrado's first 700 homebuyers come from outside Arizona, mostly from

Illinois and California, and Mrs. Campos is personally responsible for a good chunk of that. She and her husband had been renting a small duplex apartment in Santa Barbara when they discovered Verrado last year. "At first, everyone thought we were crazy to be moving to Arizona," she says. Since then, her parents, Kyle's mother and brother and his family and several other relatives and friends have moved there, too. The families are even opening a restaurant, Main Squeeze Juice and Smoothies, on Verrado's Main Street. "We never could have afforded a house in Santa Barbara," Mrs. Campos says. "The living is so much cheaper here, we can afford to open a business, too."

But living in an Arizona planned community does have its drawbacks. Such communities, for instance, take a long time to build because of their size. They go up in stages, a few hundred homes at a time. DC Ranch's total of 6,700 houses won't be finished until 2010; Verrado has completed less than 10% of its targeted 14,000 homes. "If there's an economic downturn or a change in the market," warns Dr. Butler, "it may be a long time before homeowners see the amenities developers promised them." And as times change, the design of a planned com-

munity can get stale, says Wil Cardon, president of the Cardon Group, an investment firm that purchased 20,000 acres west of Phoenix for Belmont, a giant community that will eventually contain 60,000 homes. "The earliest communities," he says, "were designed for cars and focused on golf courses. Now people want to walk everywhere and amenities need to be more creative."

Arizona's highways weren't built for the number of cars the planned communities generate and commuting from outlying small-town neighborhoods to city jobs is arduous.

And Arizona's towns are hard-pressed to keep up with services. The Arizona Republic newspaper reports that the town of Buckeye, population 17,000, will swell to over 265,000 people by 2020 when several planned communities there, including Verrado, are finished.

Navigating all the activities these developments provide can be overwhelming, says Mrs. Frye, who found her "slice of heaven" in DC Ranch. "Should we go to barbeque night, yoga class or the wine tasting?" she asks. "And what about movie night for the kids? It can be like living in Disneyland and you want to go on all the rides."