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Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News

Town Common is an urbanized development on the border of Howell. Its developers expect building to be completed within five years.

City developments nurture community

Howell focuses on 'new urbanism,' with close-knit neighborhoods

Jon Zemke / Special to The Detroit News

Advertisement

HOWELL -- A handful of developments that aim to emulate old-fashioned neighborhoods are breaking the mold of what has lately been built in Livingston County.

These "new urbanism" developments emphasize small village cores. Close-knit, tight neighborhoods made up of townhomes, apartments and houses on small lots surround these cores. A premium is put on pedestrian and nonmotorized traffic.

"When you think of the great cities in the country, there are common characteristics," Howell City Manager Shea Charles said. "Walkability is one of them."

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It's an about-face from the normal strip mall and subdivision projects that dominate development in the county. For the past several decades, most such tracts have featured stores isolated by seas of asphalt parking lots or houses fronted by large garages that block interaction with neighbors.

A smattering of the new urbanism developments have appeared in the county, standing in stark contrast to the normal strip malls and subdivisions.

The Premier Farms proposal calls for building a large village in Marion Township with hundreds of homes. Both Genoa and Oceola townships have plans to create dense urban cores on Grand River Avenue and the M-59/Latson Road intersection respectively.

The Gallery Park and Town Commons developments emphasize a similar plan on the north side of Howell. Both are within easy walking distance to a large commercial development anchored by a new supermarket.

That is what attracted Jeanie Merritt to Town Commons. The 25-year-old moved there with her young family from the Grand Rapids area in May looking for a place with a small town feel.

She often enjoys walking or in-line skating through the neighborhood and sometimes the rest of the city.

"We can just walk to the grocery store or to the ice cream store," Merritt said.

Pedestrian-friendly is what city officials and the developer had in mind when they started the project in 2001. It's now one of the development's major selling points.

"Howell itself is a great walking community. We just wanted to extend that," said Aaron Tassell, part of the development team behind Town Commons.

About 40 of Town Common's 64 acres are built out. Another 100 single family homes, which are architecturally similar to homes built 100 years ago, and 20 town homes are in the works. Tassell expects the project to be completed in five years.

City officials are working with the Michigan Department of Transportation to create pedestrian pathways along M-59 and safe crosswalks across it at Michigan Avenue and Byron Avenue. The highway is rebuilt next year.

A pedestrian pathway alongside railroad tracks under the highway is also proposed. "Putting those plans into action" comes down to who also lives in Town Commons, said putting those plans into action "comes down to



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Howell's new developments are more pedestrian friendly than typical city with a strong emphasis on providing everyday shopping necessities within walking distance from the home.

[See full image](#)

What's next

Marion, Oceola and Genoa townships are working with developers to create project village centers surrounded by dense housing. The developments are going through the planning process this year with construction of some of the projects as early as next year.

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funding at this point."

Jon Zemke is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.

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