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PRESS-REGISTER

Luxury RV lots rise to meet latest fad

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By RYAN DEZEMBER

Staff Reporter

GULF SHORES -- There will soon be a steady procession of high-end recreational vehicles -- Simonized, half-million-dollar elephants with plasma televisions and granite countertops -- rolling along Sun Belt interstates, searching for a place by the beach to park.

Or so developers in south Baldwin County are betting.

On 40 acres off the Foley Beach Express, Sagebrush Realty Development is mulching trees and preparing to excavate an H-shaped fishing lake to be centerpiece of its 176-lot, full-service motor coach resort, Bella Terra. Around 4,000 square feet in a four-star setting will cost between \$88,000 and \$200,000.

Farther south, off Baldwin County 6, developers have asked the Baldwin County Planning & Zoning Commission to dice an irregular shaped 240 acres into 772 land-yacht lots and five lakes. The body postponed a vote on the project, called RV Resorts of America, on Thursday, and will likely decide its fate in a meeting next month. The developers asked for the delay, saying they've yet to address county planners' design concerns.

Orange Beach has also caught the motor coach fever. On Tuesday, the Planning Commission vetted final plans for Buena Vista on the Beach, a 111-lot recreational vehicle resort on the north side of the beach highway. That project, proposed by a company with family ties to former HealthSouth CEO Richard Scrushy, would be a gated community with lots -- essentially 4,700-square-foot parking spaces with utilities and landscaping -- offered for around \$350,000 and governed by strict covenants that allow only well-maintained, top-of-the-line motor coaches.

In May, the Planning Commission approved plans for the 79-lot Heritage Motor Coach Resort on 8.5 acres sandwiched between Canal Road and Terry Cove.

Orange Beach developers Jim Brown and Ken Wall, both of whom were convicted in 2006 of federal charges of bribing then-Mayor Steve Russo, were the trend's local pioneers.

They built a 47-lot motor coach resort on Canal Road in 2004, selling the lots for prices between \$65,000 and \$109,000. At the time, Brown, a motor coach enthusiast, told the Press-Register he was on his fifth bus, which featured a 43-inch plasma television, granite countertops, a stainless steel refrigerator, king-size bed, walk-in closet and Travertine tile floors.

The developers of these resort projects tend to use the terms motor coach and recreational vehicle interchangeably. Generally, what they are referring to are Type A motorhomes, bus-shaped vehicles in which the living quarters are accessible from the driver's area and which can cost anywhere from about \$60,000 up, according to the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association.

The allure is a rising number of baby boomers seeking a life on the road paired with rising recreational vehicle purchases. The Recreational Vehicle Industry Association, a trade group, says recreational vehicle ownership will extend to 8.5 million households by 2010.

"We really perceive that we're insulated from the real estate industry's recession," said Trip Keber, Bella Terra's executive vice president for business development.

Hitting the road

So far Sagebrush has sold about 45 lots and many of the buyers -- well-heeled baby boomers shedding their homes and hitting the road -- paid cash, which has helped Bella Terra dodge the mortgage industry meltdown, Keber said. He envisions a circuit of Bella Terras along which unencumbered and moneyed retirees can "chase the seasons" from Portland, Ore., to Santa Fe, N.M., Scottsdale, Ariz., Gulf Shores and south Florida to Portland, Maine.

The popularity of recreational vehicles resorts has been noticed in local city halls, and planners said with home and condo sales badly slumping, it's not surprising to see developers trying something new. Some recreational vehicle resorts -- which are built faster and torn down easier than homes, shopping centers or condos, may even be an intermediate use until land values rise again.

"I kind of question whether we have too many on the market," said Orange Beach Community Development Director Jim Lawson.

The lifestyle is one of leisurely pursuit, and the lots -- not to mention the vehicles -- are expensive, he said: "You just wonder how many people like that there are."

Neither of the projects with a Gulf Shores address have been annexed into the city, but Community Development Director Steve Foote said this week that a developer floated the notion of building a motor coach resort on the Fort Morgan peninsula.

"They do seem to be popular now," Foote said. "It seems like everyone's jumping on the bandwagon."

The recreational vehicle parks in Gulf Shores are numerous but generally the traditional type in which travelers rent space, be it a for a summer weekend or a full season, Foote said. They also tend to accept a wider range of vehicles, from pull-behind folding campers to fifth wheels to self-propelled motor homes.

At Gulf State Park, for example, there are more than 500 recently renovated camp sites with power, water and sewer hookups. In the coming weeks those spots will fill with flocks of seasonal residents from the North.

About three blocks north of Gulf Shores' main public beach sits the Luxury RV Park overlooking a marsh and the state park. Down Fort Morgan Road is Bay Breeze RV Park, Doc's RV Park and Island Retreat RV Park. Others are along Alabama 59 and back roads throughout the southern part of Baldwin County.

But Gulf State Park doesn't have high-speed Internet access at each pad and concierge service. That's where the luxury comes in. At Buena Vista each brick-paved and native landscaped lot will come with a gazebo and have shared use of a pool and walking trails. Bella Terra will feature a private movie theater, bocce courts, putting greens and Jacuzzis. Designs for the RV Resorts of America site, a city of motor coach slots, show swimming pools, restaurants and tennis courts.