

Homebuilders look increasingly to South Valley

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Written by Hannah Esqueda

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In 2015, real estate developers are increasingly selecting smaller Fresno County communities and parts of the South Valley for future home building projects.

Many local homebuilders have either broken ground or opened new developments outside the City of Fresno's sphere of influence during the last few months.

"We held the grand-opening event for our Avalon Quarter development in Visalia [recently] and we have already sold [at least] 11 homes in the development," said Peter Castanos. He recently took over as owner of Wathen Castanos Homes during a leadership transition between the family members.

The 55-home development is the company's third in Visalia in several years, a result of the growing demand for new housing coupled with an abundant supply of land in the city, Castanos said.

"We realized the potential in Visalia since we had already been in Hanford and Lemoore," he said. "We knew that [Highway] 198 makes it very convenient to get around in that region and thought it would be a good location."

Based in Fresno, Wathen Castanos was the fourth-most active homebuilder in the Central Valley last year, according to Construction Monitor building permit records. The company has already established a reputation for itself among the Fresno and Clovis communities.

When developing in Visalia however, Wathen Castanos had to start from scratch and do several community outreach projects in order to help build awareness within the South Valley.

"We really wanted to let people know who we are and that we are committed to the communities we build in," Castanos said. "We've been pleased with the local response and I think people know who we are now."

The company's acquisition of Mangano Homes last year also opened up the South Valley market and San Luis Obispo areas and provided the developer with more land. Now, the company is poised to open a fourth development in Visalia in February. Pre-sale for homes in the 60-home Oak Run project in northwest Visalia will begin next month and feature 1,500 to 2,200-square-foot homes beginning in the low \$200,000s.

Woodside Homes of Fresno was also among the most active homebuilders last year. The company has just finished building its 111-unit Kensington Estates development in Fowler.

The properties range from three to six bedrooms and 2,258 to 3,517 square feet with prices running between \$284,990 and \$359,990.

"[We] chose to build in Fowler because we knew we could offer beautiful homes on large lots with large backyards," said Chris Williams, president of Woodside Homes of Fresno.

Finding enough land is expected to become increasingly important to developers as the City of Fresno's General Plan update takes effect. The plan was approved by city leaders last month and seeks to limit development at the city's edges, renewing focus on infill projects at the city's core.

Williams said that while there is still great demand for new housing within the city, he has seen very little market demand for infill developments. Like most developers, he said it is too soon to say whether or not the General Plan will deter him from building new communities within Fresno.

Infill development and the revitalization of the downtown continue to be on the agenda for Granville Homes and its GV Urban division. The homebuilder is expected to open its Brio on Broadway, multi-family housing project in downtown in early March.

The 52-unit project offers residential units on multiple levels ranging from 602 to 2,173 square feet that partially overlook a new park planned along Fulton Street, said Lisa Boyles, spokesperson for Granville Homes. An 800-square-foot commercial space will also be leased as part of the development.

GV Urban also recently broke ground on The Lede, a 2.3-acre development on Van Ness Boulevard and Calaveras Street. The project will feature one and two-bedroom live/work townhomes and is scheduled to open early next year.

Castanos said his company is also looking to develop infill projects and was lucky to acquire two land parcels in southeast Fresno near Fowler and Belmont Avenues.

The developer plans to turn the land into two separate 35- and 27-unit housing developments. The Creekside Villa project will be located in the Fancher Creek area.

“As much as we’d like to develop some new lots, we want to help the city,” Castanos said. “We’re trying to embrace what Fresno is doing with their general plan for growth and development.”

But developers are eager to continue developing in the north side of town and Boyles said Granville has plans this year to continue its Via Fiore development at Copper River Ranch in northeast Fresno as well as the La Ventana development west of Highway 99.

Castanos said his company is also eager to break ground in northwest Fresno and said that while he understands the desire for infill, he would still like the city to be open to future development in that part of town.

“It’s kind of the only direction left to go,’ he said. “You run into the San Joaquin River north towards Madera and if you go east it’s all mostly developed.

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