Lafayette developers set up shop in Baton Rouge

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Southern Lifestyle Development Co., the developer of the Acadiana Place neighborhood community in Lafayette, plans on spreading its wings across southeast Louisiana.

Southern has opened a downtown office in Baton Rouge with the purpose of serving the southern Louisiana market. The office will be the central hub for developing new projects stretching all the way to St. James Parish, said Robert Duguid, who co-founded Southern Lifestyle Development in 2010.

"Our take on the overall Baton Rouge market is that the opportunity is just phenomenally good," Duguid said. "But the barriers to entry are tough as far as getting approval.

"I think we've got the talent. We've got the leadership. I think we've got the land and we've got the resources," Duguid said.

"It's not an overnight process. It's taking time. But we think this is an area that's going to boom," Duguid said.

Over the past few years, the company concentrated on its home base of Acadiana and moved into north Louisiana. But in recent weeks, Southern Lifestyle has announced two developments in metro Baton Rouge: The Settlement at Washington in Gonzales and Conway Plantation, a Durivage development that will have nearly 900 single family homes, plus another 500 acres of commercial development.

"What we're trying to do is bring the same kind of traditional neighborhood development in Central, and Conway Plantation, a Durivage development that will have nearly 900 single family homes, plus another 500 acres of commercial development. We're trying to bring that same kind of lifestyle to the Baton Rouge market," Duguid said.

The project is set to begin in the summer of 2016, with the initial phase taking several years.

Paints Baton Rouge, is president of Southern Lifestyle Development, said the company is looking for more land to develop in the Baton Rouge area. There are active negotiations underway with landowners to build more communities in the area.

"It's a very active market. We've got a lot of activity going on with the market demand," Duguid said.

"We have a lot of interest in the Baton Rouge market," Duguid said.

While the homes in River Ranch have a price point of about $265 per square foot, the homes at散發 Plantation are priced from $199 to $299 per square foot.

"We would like to be one of the fastest growing developers around here," Duguid said.

Over nearly 10 years, Southern Lifestyle has developed River Ranch and Twin Creeks in Gonzales and Lake Charles to Beaumont City and Monroe.

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Plans are to develop more than 1,000 lots in 2013, and Bailey said that the current backlog of projects all tied to the development of the project is "enough to keep us busy for the next few years and beyond." The development, which began in Lafayette's River Ranch community, a groundbreaking traditional neighborhood development, or TND, project in 2006, employs several best-walkable neighborhoods that use traditional urban planning principles. These principles include walkable communities, with a mix of housing types to accommodate a range of residents—from young people just entering the job market to retirees looking for a maintenance-free environment.

"It's not a new concept," Bailey said. "You go to an old city, and you see where the baker would live above his shop and people would walk to work. People walked everywhere, but we got away from that concept. It's about time we got back to it." Duggleby, an attorney who did a lot of work in development and construction, became interested in TNDs through his friend, landscape architect Steve Darch. Oubre was involved in the development of Seabrook, Florida. Oubre, of Architectural Consulting in Lafayette, has gone on to be involved in a host of TND projects across Louisiana, from River Ranch to the Willow Greens development, and most recently at Magnolia Square in St. Tammany Parish.

"Steve drank the Kool-Aid really early on about TNDs," Duggleby said. "When we would get together for lunch or coffee, we would say that everyone in Lafayette needed to do TNDs.

When a 25-acre site between Bayou Vermilion and Balino Sason Road became available, Duggleby said it was obvious that this should be the site for River Ranch. River Ranch had a difficult birth, with many investors from neighboring who were having a community development in their backyard. After a compromise was reached, Duggleby said the other developers had to get scores of approvals from the city, parish, to make their community work. He said there are now about 750 housing units in which about 500 people live.

"The public understands that the needs are greater than when we started River Ranch," Duggleby said. "The general public idea in its purest form, is probably, or maybe fortunately for us, more non-developers are willing to let the city work. It's much more capital-intensive if done correctly.

To make a TND work, said Duggleby, the amenities, such as parks, shopping centers, and retail centers, need to be operational when the first residences start to open.

That can be an issue because while selling lots to builders or homeowners in a profitable way for a developer, having a public amenity like a park, and using part of the residential lots to sell residential homes and residential lots, rather than put it in as it is on the city end of the development." Duggleby said.

Some retailers and restaurant operators also are wary of going into a neighborhood that has a critical mass of nearby residences. "It's tricky for us, the retail and service providers who have come in River Ranch have done well," Duggleby said. "Sales are generally better, particularly for food and beverage providers. They have to keep an eye on the working distances.

While Southern Lifestyle Builders made a name for itself with TNDs, the company has done traditional subdivisions. Bailey said the concept doesn't work in some areas, and there isn't enough potential for the company to do the development. And some municipalities have passed ordinances setting a minimum size for a TND, such as 100 acres.

"In some parts of East Baton Rouge Parish, it's hard to find TNDs in a good location," he said. That's even Southern Lifestyle Development Co., which developed Sugar Mill Pond, seen in Trump Palace and River Ranch in Lafayette, recently opened an office in Baton Rouge with an eye on developing property all the way to St. Tammany Parish.