

Plans underway to make the largest piece of undeveloped property in Gonzales into upscale, mixed use development

The Advocate – A developer plans to build an upscale mixed-use community of retail stores, apartments and homes on a former cattle ranch, which is the largest piece of undeveloped property in Gonzales.

Lafayette-based Southern Lifestyle Development has a contract to purchase the property, situated on La. 44 just south of I-10, for \$8 million and plans to close on the transaction in the spring, said Prescott Bailey, who works for the development company.

The 344-acre ranch, which is known locally as the M.P. [Evans](#) property after the late Merritt P. Evans Jr., who raised cattle there for years, is being sold by the heirs of the estate.

Bailey said construction of the development's infrastructure – streets, drainage, water and sewer lines – is expected to begin in the summer or fall with the development to be built in phases over the next six years.

“It's a great location with quick access to the interstate and the plants” along the river, Bailey said.

Including construction of homes and commercial buildings, the company expects a total investment of about \$325 million in the project, which will be known as the Conway Plantation, Bailey said. The development company anticipates investing \$50 million in the land and infrastructure, he said.

Southern Lifestyle Development's first mixed-use development was the Village of River Ranch in Lafayette in 1996. It was followed by Sugar Mill Pond in Youngsville near Lafayette.

Other Southern Lifestyle Development communities are in different phases of construction in Lafayette and Youngsville and more are planned in Lake Charles, Sulphur, Bossier City and Monroe, according to the company's website.

The company is also developing The Settlement on Shoecreek, a 150-acre property off Sullivan Road in [Central](#).

It was the project in Central and the one in Gonzales that prompted the company to open an office in December on Main Street in Baton Rouge for its projects "east of the Mississippi," Bailey said.

The mixed-use neighborhoods created by Southern Lifestyle Development share features such as walkability, recreation, parks and open spaces, Bailey said.

The sellers of the property took into consideration the purchaser's "past successful developments and their positive reputation," said Gary Fontenot, a broker and one of the owners of Realty Executives South Louisiana, in Prairieville, which is representing the heirs in the sale.

The heirs, he said, expect the development will be something that will "significantly complement the city and parish in the future."

In Gonzales, the main entry point into the development will be a boulevard off La. 44, leading into 100 acres of a traditional neighborhood development, a term used to describe designs that put shops, homes and parks within easy walking distance of one another.

Two- to three-story buildings along the boulevard will feature shops and restaurants on the bottom floor and apartments on

the upper floors, Bailey said.

Bailey said the development also will have a “green civic space,” an area where events like concerts and art shows can be held, which will be free to the public.

Beyond the traditional neighborhood development area, there will be 20 acres of apartments and 203 acres of single-family homes.

There will be 930 residential lots in Conway Plantation with house prices ranging from the low \$200,000s up to the \$400,000s, Bailey said.

The development will feature nine lakes, jogging and walking trails and parks, he said.

Southern Lifestyle Development also plans to donate a portion of the property to the Gonzales Fire Department for a fire station, Bailey said.

“They’ve done such wonderful work in other places, and we’ve seen their work,” said Gonzales Planning and Zoning Commission Chairman Frank Cagnolatti, who along with the city’s mayor and other officials have visited some of the company’s developments.

Conway Plantation in Gonzales is expected to raise the value of surrounding property, Cagnolatti said.

The M.P. Evans property where Conway Plantation is planned was annexed into Gonzales in 2012. In 2011, the Ascension Parish School Board purchased 63 acres of the ranch for \$1.5 million as the site of a future high school.

In 2013, the Gonzales City Council approved a variety of zoning requests made by realtors representing the heirs to the property.

Before that change, the land had been zoned residential in a

category that allowed three houses per acre, a zoning designation that all property annexed into the city receives automatically.

“The property was initially rezoned to allow its highest and best use with the possibility that as in many large developments some approved modifications might be requested to accommodate more specific design as determined by the purchaser and the city’s governing authority,” said Fontenot, of Realty Executives South Louisiana.

Bailey said Southern Lifestyle Development will be going before the Gonzales Planning and Zoning Commission to request the removal of light industrial zoning on the property.

Conway Plantation will have three different types of zones: commercial zoning for retail, residential zoning and zoning for traditional neighborhood development, Bailey said.

“It sounds like something that would be wonderful for this area, especially with the growth to come,” Gonzales Mayor Barney Arceneaux said.