



Melvin Nunoz works on rafters on top of a new home at the River Dunes development in Pamlico County near Oriental. The 1,300-acre site features a man-made harbor, shown in the background, which will have 400 boat slips.

*Staff Photo by Chuck Liddy*

## Ecofriendly design marks Pamlico development

WADE RAWLINS, Staff Writer

ORIENTAL - The first houses of a small coastal village are rising on a finger of land near where the broad Neuse River flows into Pamlico Sound.

What's not here sets this boating community apart from the hundreds of waterfront subdivisions transforming North Carolina's inner coast: No line of private boat docks in front of each waterfront house at River Dunes; no wooden bulkheads banding the shoreline; no marina in the mouth of the creek.

More than 600 houses are planned on the tract, far less than the 1,300 that could be built, keeping average lot sizes of more than one acre. A 400-slip marina carved out of the property's interior should reduce pollution to creeks. Land preserved by taxpayers will keep 238 acres largely undeveloped and protect a creek.

River Dunes occupies a fragile chunk of Pamlico County, a forested peninsula veined with five creeks and more than 14 miles of waterfront. The Neuse River and Broad Creek wash its shores.

River Dunes is the largest single investment in the history of Pamlico County, projected to add \$850 million to the tax base. Its design is pivotal to the future health of surrounding waters and salt marsh that offer a haven for juvenile fish and shellfish.

Ed Mitchell, president of River Dunes Corp., said the goal was to strike a balance between making a profit and protecting natural resources. The developers view environmental stewardship as a smart selling point to the upscale market of boaters and nature lovers who are prospective buyers.

"There are a lot of eyes looking to see if it's going to work," Mitchell said.

Environmental advocates and regulators say River Dunes offers lessons in how coastal development should occur.

"It was a model that we would love to see other developers follow," said Ted Tyndall, assistant director for permits and enforcement for the state Division of Coastal Management. "There is a lot of greed out there today," he said, but River Dunes "never came across as being greedy."

### Covered in forest

For nearly 50 years, the 1,300-acre tract grew pine trees for the Weyerhaeuser Corp. to turn pulp into paper. Today, much of it remains covered in forest, logging roads and dense thickets too tangled for easy walking.

More than a decade ago, Weyerhaeuser's real estate group saw the tract as well-suited for a residential golf community with a marina on Broad Creek, similar to its Cypress Landing golf subdivision up the coast near Washington, N.C. But company officials wanted to avoid the lengthy and expensive legal battle with environmental groups that for two years had tied up the construction of a marina to serve Cypress Landing.

In 1999, Weyerhaeuser real estate officials approached the N.C. Coastal Federation, an advocacy group, and invited it to look at the River Dunes site and share concerns about developing the land.

"It opened the door for them to influence the process," said Mitchell, who handled the project for Weyerhaeuser before joining the group that bought it from Weyerhaeuser.

Todd Miller, executive director of the Coastal Federation, said the developers were open to constructive criticism and showed flexibility in the

design.

At the recommendation of the federation, the company hired landscape architect Elizabeth Brabec, a founder of Land Ethics Inc., a design studio, to draw a conceptual plan for the property.

Brabec's plan identified sensitive areas where construction should be avoided, left wetlands undisturbed and preserved several hundred acres of open space. It minimized the amount of hard surfaces. Roads, rooftops and athletic courts prevent rainfall from soaking into the ground and instead create runoff -- the primary pollution of coastal waters.

"You want to be able to absorb as much storm water on site as possible," said Brabec, who now teaches at Utah State University. "That was really a guiding force in what we were doing."

The developers included many of the concepts in the final design.

Many roads will be more narrow than standard width. Walking paths and parking spaces will be gravel rather than paved. The community will encourage people to leave their cars parked once they arrive and use walking trails, bicycles and golf carts, which require less parking area. Houses will be clustered in three areas along the harbor, the river and creekside, with a village center, performing arts pavilion and post office creating a sense of community.

### **Preserving shoreline**

Developers originally planned to put a marina on a creek and allow private boat docks -- the standard approach at the coast. But given the amount of waterfront -- 14 miles -- state environmental regulators worried that hundreds of boat docks and bulkheads would alter the natural shoreline.

Bulkheads prevent waterfront land from eroding but destroy what is in front: the shallow salt marsh that provides vital nurseries for young fish and shrimp.

Instead, the developers decided to carve out an interior yacht basin and to cut a channel to a creek. Creating the 28-acre basin with 400 boat slips involved moving more than 500,000 cubic yards of dirt -- enough to fill a line of 50,000 dump trucks, which would stretch roughly from Raleigh to Asheville.

But it also transformed interior land into 56 harborside lots, raising each lot's value from \$100,000 to \$400,000 each, Mitchell said. At those prices, the \$14 million basin would pay for itself, so they dropped the idea of putting a marina on a creek.

"The cumulative effects of 258 private docks would have significant impacts on the water quality," Mitchell said. "Once we understood the water quality issues, we were convinced it was the right thing to do."

Of nearly 400 acres of wetlands on the tract, the development has disturbed less than an acre, Mitchell said.

Taxpayers also made an investment in protecting the water.

At Miller's suggestion, the developers agreed to sell a conservation easement on 238 acres to prevent development around the headwaters of Gum Thicket Creek, which flows directly into the Neuse River.

To buy development rights, the Coastal Federation and Neuse River Foundation obtained a \$1.25 million grant from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, a state agency. No houses will be built on more than 118 acres around the headwaters, and just 21 houses will be built on large lots on another 120 acres near the creek.

"The creek was identified as the most environmentally sensitive part of the property," said Bill Holman, executive director of the Clean Water Management Trust Fund.

Miller, of the Coastal Federation, said River Dunes will be worth watching as it fills out over the next decade.

"Whether we anticipated the issues, we'll know in a few years," Miller said. "The indicator will be whether those adjacent waters remain open and productive for shellfishing."

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