

Elbert County starting to look
a lot like Douglas, some observe

by Jill Jamieson-Nichols

Some people look at Elbert County and see Douglas County all over again.

One of the fastest-growing counties in the nation a decade ago, Douglas County has matured, pushing growth eastward into neighboring Elbert County.

The shift hasn't gone unnoticed. Wal-Mart lined up a 16-acre site just west of Elizabeth for a new Supercenter to open by summer 2009. The store will anchor the county's first significant commercial development in Elbert County, where 98 percent of the existing structures are homes.

"Elizabeth looks to me a lot like Parker of 1985," said Lance Bakemeyer, a Parker native and broker with Coldwell Banker Sullivan Group in Elizabeth. "The kind of growth that happened there looks to me exactly like what is happening here."

"We've seen the growth shift to the east because Douglas County continues to develop and build out," said Karl Nyquist. Nyquist and partner Dave Pretzler are the original developers of the 1,100-acre Wild Pointe Ranch. They sold the land to Wal-Mart and, including the 135,000-square-foot store, have room for 300,000 sf of retail and commercial development on Colorado Highway 86.

Nyquist and Pretzler will develop some of the retail space themselves, and have activity from a bank and food users for some of the pad sites. Greenwood Village-based DPC Development is marketing the commercial space at the center, called Wild Pointe Ranch Marketplace.

"I wish we could say we're rocket scientists," said Nyquist, who has developed mostly residential projects in Douglas and Elbert counties. "We just decided that Elizabeth was probably the best place where we were going to experience growth similar to what was going on in Parker 10 years before."

Elbert County attracts people looking for a rural lifestyle close to the city. While the county stretches all the way east to Limon, 87 percent of the population is in the northwest, closest to the Douglas and Arapahoe county lines (and Parker and Interstate 25).

Lots traditionally run from 2 ½ acres on up; an average priced home is around \$350,000 to \$400,000. As a result, there aren't a lot of first-time homebuyers, and the housing market hasn't taken the beating it's taken in some parts of the Denver metro area, said Tom Maroney, marketing manager for Security Title in Elizabeth. Maroney, who also does land development and entitlements, has worked on around 80 percent of the land-use projects in Elbert County since 1990.

Among the largest developments is Spring Valley Ranch, 10 miles north of Elizabeth. Its 1,690 lots are a quarter to 1 ½ acres and sell for \$85,000 to \$150,000.

There are 4,500 to 6,000 lots approved or in the pipeline in northwestern Elbert County, according to Maroney. They include 920 one-quarter- to one-half-acre lots proposed at Bandera, northwest of Elizabeth at the Douglas County line.

Between 2010 and 2015, Elbert is projected to be the second-fastest-growing county in the state – percentagewise - behind Garfield County, according to the State

Demography Office. In actual numbers, that means the population (estimated at 22,786 in 2005) will grow from 25,848 in 2010 to 32,307 by 2015.

Playing in favor of growth is water. "There are a lot more water resources in Elbert County than in Douglas at this point," Nyquist commented.

Wal-Mart presents an opportunity in the Elizabeth area for a different kind of housing growth, such as townhomes and apartments, said Bakemeyer. Without them, most Wal-Mart workers, like most of the teachers in the local schools, will commute from Parker, Castle Rock or Denver, he said.

"We feel (Wal-Mart) is going to have a significant effect on real estate development in the Elizabeth area," Maroney said. "There are going to be lot of opportunities where there wasn't before, both residential and commercial," he said.

Elbert County has undertaken transportation and master planning efforts to guide future growth, encouraging housing diversity, clustering of single-family homes and open space preservation.

"I see a lot of Douglas County in Elbert County," said Bakemeyer. "The people who are going to do well over the next 10 or 15 years are the ones who see that."

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