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FEATURED

Hahira Grows: City accommodates growth with new development

City accommodates growth with new development

By Katelyn Umholtz katelyn.umholtz@gafnews.com Jul 24, 2019

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Katelyn Umholtz | The Valdosta Daily Times Orvis McNeal Estates is located off of Highway 41 just north of Hahira.

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HAHIRA — New development hasn't come to Hahira in more than 10 years.

With problems arising from past developments and the recession affecting new development, the Hahira City Council has been careful about having new residential neighborhoods pop up in town.

Here's where the problem lies: Hahira's population is growing.

The growth is slow, but the city has seen an increase in people almost every year since the 2010 Census.

"You need to prepare for that growth in the right way," Hahira City Manager Jonathan Sumner said. "The council began a concerted effort to look for not just any development, but the right kind of development in the town. That's including but not limited to commercial development as well as residential development that supports it."

Now, someone whose Hahira roots date back to the town's early days wants to be part of that growth.

A 64-acre lot sits up against Audubon Heights on Highway 41, and it has since been approved and annexed into Hahira by City Council with ground broken to be the future space for Orvis McNeal Estates.

Planned for single-family homes, City Council approved — with a few major exceptions — what has been nicknamed by developer Chris Connell as a legacy project.

"I grew up in Hahira," Connell said. "I grew up there on that family farm. There are ancestors that came before me who laid the groundwork that made (Hahira) possible."

His great-grandfather was the town's first doctor and the mayor for 12 years. His grandfather was an assistant principal, while Connell's grandmother, Audrey McNeal, owned a popular floral shop and once held the title of Miss Hahira; she passed away last fall.

Even his mother lived and worked in that same floral shop and then was tragically killed in Hahira.

The Orvis McNeal Estates is named after Connell's grandfather. The original layout consisted of three types of lots — with 6,000 square feet, 10,000 square feet and 15,000 square feet.

It was approved but not without some much-needed critiques of the plan.

"There have been other high-density developments in the city that have not been looked favorably upon," Sumner said. "Whereas the new developer was proposing an innovative approach, the council did not feel that there was enough there to justify looking at something out of the box."

In particular, City Council did not approve of the 6,000 or more square-foot lots because of a past development of lots at the same size in Mulberry Place, near where McNeal Estates is being built.

The developer questioned why these types of lots were in Hahira's zoning code in the first place if City Council doesn't want them built in the city limits.

"The developer raised a great question," Sumner said. "This is something the council needs to consider and struggles with. We need to find out what type of development we're going to accept in the future."

Regardless, Connell and his team, which includes civil engineer Matt Phelps of Phelps Associated Construction and Engineering in Valdosta, had to go back to the drawing board.

"It's a little frustrating because the hardest part of this process has been putting the time and energy into creating what I felt like was the very best plan I could," Connell said. "I didn't feel like there was a really good reason for them not to approve the R-6 plots."

Connell said it came down to less green space to accommodate bigger lots, but he won't let it get in the way of what he has planned for his Meemaw.

She passed away in November, just a month after the McNeal Estates plan was approved by Hahira City Council.

As a tribute to her, Connell will have a street named after her, Audrey Lane, and a flower garden dedicated to Meemaw, his mother and his uncle.

"He's putting his family name on it," Phelps said. "As long as this exists in Hahira, the McNeal family will continue to have its place in the history of Hahira."

Connell said he is excited to put the McNeal family name on something long-lasting such as a neighborhood but there is a lot of pressure for him to get it right.

"The hardest part of the project for me has been the pressure to deliver something that my family would feel good about and reflects well on the family name," Connell said. "As we know in the South, a family name means everything."

McNeal Estates is in its first step of infrastructure, Connell said.

The team is currently burying sewer pipe and planning to pave streets and manhole covers, which has been slightly delayed due to weather.

Connell estimates building phase one out of three of homes come December.

“We really appreciate the developers looking at us,” Sumner said. “We welcome additional opportunities, and I think this is just the beginning. We’ve got the capacity, ability and opportunity.”

Katelyn Umholtz is a reporter with the Valdosta Daily Times. She can be contacted at (229)244-3400 ext. 1256.

Conversation

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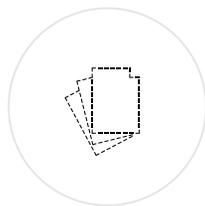


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