

Comal sprawl: Growth sees development gobble up agricultural land

By Greg Bowen New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung | Posted: Sunday, March 29, 2015 12:17 am

Tom Hornseth's map is splotched liberally with red patches showing the areas of Comal County where open land has given way to subdivisions.

Hornseth, as county engineer, is charged with administering Comal's subdivision regulations. As part of those duties, he's been tracking for the better part of two decades what he calls "subdivision activity," generally the conversion of farm and ranch lands to housing subdivisions.

"Over the last 20 years or so, there has been a steady conversion of agricultural land into single-family residential developments," Hornseth said.

From 2000 through mid-2008, he counted some 19,540 new subdivided lots.

He tallied up another 4,495 or so from 2008 to 2013.

Add those up — and you've got more than 24,000 new subdivided lots on land in Comal County where cattle or goats once grazed and hay, corn or wheat once grew.

Over at the Comal Appraisal District, they've been watching the conversion, too.

Jennifer Salazar, the CAD's director of operations, has stats showing the change. The number of acres of agricultural land in Comal declined by a whopping 21,540 acres from 2004 to 2014, according to CAD records.

While Comal's ranches and farms reached out across 232,176 acres in 2004, the land dedicated to ag dwindled to 210,636 acres last year. That's a drop of almost 10 percent.

Meanwhile, the value of Comal's diminishing ag lands has skyrocketed.

According to CAD, the remaining 210,636 acres carried a market value of \$1.58 billion in 2014. CAD's data shows that the value of the county's ag land in 2004 — even with some 10 percent more lands being grazed or farmed — came to \$806 million, a number roughly half the 2014 value.

If you do the math, it reveals that the average per-acre market value for ag land in Comal has more than doubled, from \$3,472 ten years ago to \$7,503 last year.

No wonder



Riding the Boom

Construction of a new home can be seen Friday in the Vintage Oaks subdivision.

So it's no wonder the farmers and ranchers are selling out to developers eager to rush in to serve a growingly urban population by putting up everything from gated communities to 1950s-style drive-ins, from Targets to Buc-ee's, from rifle ranges to affordable apartment villages financed with federal tax credits.

In recent days, an 1,800 home subdivision has been announced on ranchland in Bulverde and a 1,500-home subdivision planned on grazing land just west of New Braunfels on South Cranes Mill Road hit the news.

And let's not forget the 2,465-acre Veramendi project, which would be the largest development in modern New Braunfels history. It would be built on the Word-Borchers family ranch along Loop 337 and when completed would feature more than 5,000 dwellings, as well as a resort hotel, a university, a hospital, two public schools, shopping and more.

Everybody wants a piece

"Everybody's wanting a piece of the Hill Country," said Comal County ag agent Chris Wiemers. "Ranches are being divided up and turned into subdivisions. Copper Ridge, Vintage Oaks, River Chase. All those areas used to all be ranches."

Wiemers said ranchers are "selling their land at a premium because of the aesthetics of the Hill Country and people wanting to move into Comal County."

Many of the selling ranchers, he said, are pocketing their profits and "moving down south or out east or somewhere and they're buying larger tracts of land where they'll continue to do what they'd been doing in Comal."

"If you look at Creekside — out there at FM 306 and I-35 — I know people who used to farm that," Wiemers said. The Creekside area is now one of New Braunfels' fastest growing commercial zones, with shopping, restaurants, medical, apartments and more. A drive-in theater is going in off FM 1101 on what was once farmland about a mile of way from Creekside. Subdivisions and other developments are springing up out there now as well.

"The extension office had a test plot there one time, right where all that's gone in — hundreds of acres that used to be farm land," Wiemers said. "That land on 1101, I watched a guy just this past year, he was out there 'combine-ing' his crop, bringing his crop in, as a developer's road excavator was cutting a road through the same field. Both the combine and the excavator were going at the same time in the field. The farmer got his last crop out and as soon as his crop was out, that field was being turned into an industrial park. You just see a lot of that going on."

On the other hand, while the area is losing a lot of ag-producing lands, Wiemers said, new homeowners who are scooping it up in small pieces are "lovin' every minute of it and enjoying livin' in this county."

Multiple buyers

Paul Powell, a land buyer for Lennar, a player in housing development in Comal, talked about land prices after his firm's recent purchase of the

780-acre 4S Ranch in the Bulverde area, where Lennar plans to build over 1,800 homes.

"We structured the deal right to where it works for us and we paid what we think is fair," Powell said.

Developers were waiting for land prices to take a dip with the economic downturn, but the dip never materialized, he said.

"When the economy went down, we never saw the land prices really go down. Especially in the areas where you have utilities. It only takes one buyer at a high price to get into high numbers, and there's multiple buyers out there right now."

Getting smaller

County Engineer Hornseth also noted that with the conversion of ag lands to subdivisions earlier on, the majority of the developments featured lots sizes of one acre or greater, due to the county's minimum lot size requirements associated with use of on-site-sewage facilities or septic systems.

But that's changing.

"We are now seeing a land development trend in the unincorporated area that utilizes organized wastewater collection and treatment plants. The use of these systems for wastewater allows smaller lot sizes and higher-density developments featuring typical urban lots sizes as small as 0.15 acres," Hornseth said. "There are approximately eight new developments under construction or in the planning stage that are using or will use wastewater treatment plants to facilitate these higher density subdivisions."

"Everyone wants a piece, and the pieces are getting smaller," Hornseth said.