

Hays County springing to life

New developments growing at faster clip

By [M.B. Taboada](#), [Shonda Novak](#)
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
Thursday, August 16, 2007

DRIPPING SPRINGS — Driving onto Howard Ranch is like traveling back in time.

Homes in the residential development mimic historic Southern architecture, with three-quarter-acre to 4-acre lots and Onion Creek running through the 250 acres.

The development also has a covered wooden bridge arching over a small spring-fed creek and natural-gas street lamps that once graced the streets of Philadelphia.

"It's a real old-timey country neighborhood," said developer Erik Howard, a defensive tackle for the New York Giants in the 1980s and '90s.

Howard Ranch, which broke ground in 2005 and has its grand opening this week, is part of the burgeoning growth near Dripping Springs in Hays County. The Headwaters at Barton Creek will be a 1,331-acre master-planned community. An upscale residential development is set for the area near the Salt Lick Barbecue restaurant. And the ever-mushrooming Belterra subdivision, which will eventually have 2,000 homes, is continuing to transform the landscape.

These and other developments eventually could add more than 8,600 homes to Dripping Springs' 120-square-mile extraterritorial jurisdiction, city development coordinator Jon Thompson said. About 30,000 people live within Dripping Springs' city limits and jurisdiction.

A big part of the area's appeal is its quality of life, which includes a highly regarded school district and proximity to Austin, its Hill Country views and small-town feel, City Administrator Michelle Fischer said.

Previously held back by a lack of water and utilities, Dripping Springs has a new pipeline that increased water supplies in recent years, helping to set the stage for the area's growth.

A growing number of commercial projects are following the homes, increasing job opportunities, Fischer said. A Home Depot is under construction in a 55-acre center on U.S. 290 that will be anchored by an H-E-B Plus grocery store. In addition, a number of smaller commercial centers are planned that will bring more retail, offices and restaurants to the area, Fischer said.

At Howard Ranch, the developer said he originally bought the land less than two miles from Dripping Springs to retire and raise his children, but he later was approached by the city to develop it.

While renovating the homestead, a 1922 farmhouse owned by the Elsner family, Howard found a plank in the walls with the names of those who built it. Coincidentally, it was built by another set of Howards, Ed and Jamie.

"This was the Elsner ranch, but the people who built the original house, their name was Howard," he said. "We decided we're going to stick to the name and pay tribute to the ones who built the original farmhouse."

Howard Ranch will eventually have a 17-acre town square with a general store, as well as restaurants and specialty retail.

By 2009, there will be more than 125 lots. Homes will range from about 3,000 square feet to 10,000 square feet, with prices ranging from \$475,000 to nearly \$2 million.

Developers Dick Rathgeber and Terry Mitchell are behind the Headwaters at Barton Creek project east of Dripping Springs.

Headwaters will have 1,000 single-family homes and a park three times the size of Zilker. The project received preliminary plat approval for its first phase Tuesday.

Work is expected to start on the streets and utilities in the next 90 days. Construction should get under way on the first homes in early to mid-2008, Rathgeber said. Prices are expected to range from \$180,000 to about \$600,000.

Formerly the Hazy Hills Ranch, 330 acres will be developed and another 1,000 acres will be preserved as green space and parkland, Rathgeber said. The open space will include a wilderness camp for Boy Scouts where no permanent buildings can be located, Rathgeber said.

In nearby Driftwood, Salt Lick Barbecue owner Scott Roberts plans to transform 500 acres near his legendary restaurant into 150 luxury home sites, a spa, a lodge, an upscale restaurant and 50 acres of vineyards. The property, near RM 150 and RM 1826, has two miles of Onion Creek running through it. Home prices will start at about \$800,000. The development, which may break ground as early as next month, also will have an amphitheater, a town center for Driftwood and have nine miles of hike-and-bike trails.

The Forestar Real Estate Group, a division of Temple-Inland Inc., is developing the 362-acre Arrowhead Ranch. The property, formerly the Star D Ranch, fronts Onion Creek and is on the south side of U.S. 290, two miles west of RM 12. Arrowhead will be a master-planned community with 200 lots.

With all the new development coming in, Dripping Springs' biggest challenge is to manage its growth, Fischer said. The city has revamped its development code, improving on or adding to existing ordinances concerning subdivisions and water quality, among others, to better preserve the area's character and protect its environmental features, she said.

"Maintaining the Hill Country atmosphere is very important to the city," she said. "We don't want to lose the reason people are coming here."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin