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New homes going up in northwest Austin

By [Shonda Novak](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
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When he steps out of his new house in the Highland Horizon subdivision in far Northwest Austin, Mike Maixner doesn't have to look far to see more rooftops rising. Homes are under construction across the street and behind his house.

Maixner, a 29-year-old pharmacist, his wife, Anna, and their two children recently moved from Corpus Christi, settling into a two-story house built by Streetman Homes.

"Once we saw this neighborhood, I couldn't get it out of my mind," Maixner said. "It's all new, well-kept and doesn't look like a big cookie-cutter neighborhood."

Maixner said the Austin-Round Rock area appealed to the couple because "it would be a good place to raise our kids," Colsen, 2, and 10-month-old Brylee.

The Maixners will have lots of new neighbors in the next decade and beyond.

A swath of the Central Texas region that includes far Northwest Austin, Leander, Cedar Park and western Round Rock is going to be a hot spot for new homes in the coming years, real estate experts say.

The area already has been booming, and builders are accelerating home production in a number of new communities. Growth is expected to push even farther north, across FM 1431 over time, local housing experts say.

An additional 23,000 lots in the area are ready for building homes or are in the approval process, said Eldon Rude, director of the Austin division of Metrostudy, which tracks the housing market.

"The northwest area," Rude said, "will be the dominant region for new home demand over the next several years."

Good schools, jobs, land.

The northwest sector is booming, experts say, because it is giving buyers and builders what they want.

The area will have adequate land and lots to meet demand in the \$225,000 to \$500,000 price range, in which prospective home buyers are finding it easier to obtain mortgages than in the lower prices ranges because of stricter lending requirements, Rude said.

But the area also is a hit in other ways — it has desirable schools and close to some of the region's largest employers. Plus, the area has increased accessibility with new toll roads and a new commuter rail line from Leander to downtown Austin.

Through the first three months of this year, the northwest area accounted for 18.5 percent of the new homes that builders started in the region, with an average asking price of about \$270,000, according to Metrostudy.

"The area continues to represent a sizable percentage of all new homes built in the Austin region," Rude said.

'100 percent bullish'

The new home development in the northwest sector comes as the region's housing market overall appears to be turning a corner after the recession.

From April through June, builders started construction across Central Texas on nearly the same number of homes — 1,794 — as they did in the same period a year ago, when the stimulus of a federal homebuyer tax credit helped spur sales and homebuilding.

The 1,794 homes started in the second quarter are a signal that demand is returning — at a time when the supply of new homes available for sale is at its lowest level since the mid-1990s, Rude said.

That is the kind of data that has builders moving fast to increase their supply of lots that have utilities in place and are ready for homes to go up.

"We are 100 percent bullish on Central Texas," said Bill Hinckley, president of the Lookout Group, the master developer of Crystal Falls, a development in the Leander area. Ultimately destined for 7,500 to 10,000 homes by 2025, the subdivision has been one of the region's top-selling communities in recent years.

"Austin is ground zero for good news in an otherwise gloomy housing scene nationally," Hinckley said. "We enjoy jobs, net migration, a young and smart labor force and a shortage of locations (in demand) for close-in residential growth."

Breaking new ground

To keep up with current and anticipated housing demand in the northwest area, builders are looking for more land even as they construct hundreds of homes in existing and planned communities.

Many have depleted their supply of lots in prime locations and "they're very hungry to replace those," said Gary Newman, who co-manages Trio Investments, a limited partnership, with Todd Janssen.

Trio is developing two communities in the northwest area, Pearson Place at Avery Ranch and Northwoods at Avery Ranch.

At Northwoods, which is on Lakeline Boulevard, one mile east of the 183-A toll road, Trio will prepare 550 lots for builders to construct new homes. In early September, Trio plans to start developing 170 lots for the first phase, with construction on the first homes expected to start in March 2012. Prices will range from \$200,000 to \$450,000.

On the east side of Avery Ranch — one of the region's top-selling subdivisions — and just north of Texas 45, Trio plans to develop 392 home sites at Pearson Place at Avery Ranch.

The first 104 lots will be available for builders to start constructing houses in October. A grand opening for the model homes for each of the builders — Pulte, Streetman Homes and Grand Haven Homes — is expected in late February.

Homes are expected to be priced from about \$240,000 to the high \$400,000s, Newman said. Buyers are expected to include families from Avery Ranch who want to move into larger homes as well as empty nesters downsizing from Avery Ranch, Newman said.

In a new section of Crystal Falls, Taylor Morrison, a national homebuilding firm based in Arizona, ultimately will build 1,176 houses in a mix of price ranges. About 40 homes are under construction in the first phase, which will have 170 homes in all.

As the development has progressed and "people can visualize what it will look like, there's been more and more interest," said Bruce Jones, a senior sales consultant with Taylor Morrison. Early in the year, Taylor Morrison was selling one or two houses a month, but it had eight sales in May.

One section, Crystal Cove, will have 400 homes eventually. Base prices will start in the low \$180,000s, the first time that price point has been offered in Crystal Falls, Jones said. The first phase will have 63 homes, with the first ready for residents by August or September. Eight homes are currently under contract.

Taylor Morrison is seeing a mix of buyers, from first-time homeowners to move-up buyers and empty nesters.

'A good buzz' for Austin

Hinckley said there is "a good buzz" about the Austin region "no matter where you travel."

"Younger folks want to see what it's about, and a whole slew of baby boomers from across the state want to retire here," Hinckley said.

Maixner, the new Highland Horizon resident, would have no argument with the area's appeal. Maixner said he took a pay cut to move to the Austin area but has no regrets.

"The public recreation for both kids and adults here is unbelievable," said Maixner, who lives just a few houses down from his in-laws.

"I was amazed at how many and how clean all the parks are in this surrounding area," he said.

The area, Maixner said, "provides a better environment for my family, and my in-laws are just a very welcomed bonus to the move."

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Growing subdivisions

Some of the subdivisions in the Northwest Austin region projected to see significant growth in coming years:

Lots under development Subdivision or in approval process:

1. Santa Rita 5,601
2. Crystal Falls 2,696
3. Ranch at Brushy Creek 971
4. Stonewall Ranch 812
5. Northwoods at Avery Ranch 690



Source: Metrostudy **Linda Scott** AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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