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Shelby County city looking to the future **Chelsea**

Sunday, July 09, 2006

By Dana C. Crisson

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Wide open spaces - it's something the Dixie Chicks sang about needing in their popular song a few years back. And it's exactly what developers and homeowners are finding in the booming city of Chelsea.

"Many people want to get away from the urban sprawl and find big tracts of land, and that is what we offer here in Chelsea - lots of wide open spaces," said city clerk Bob Wanninger.

"People want to get away from all the congested subdivisions and the traffic and get out in the countryside, where they can find some room, and they can do that here in Chelsea.

"It used to be that people just weren't interested in moving out here. The mountain was a big barrier," he said.

"But that isn't the case any longer. Everything is new and wonderful here. Developers are talking to us all the time. We are a very hot property right now. It is almost like we have a tiger by the tail."

With more than 40 new subdivisions including 7,000-plus new houses under construction, Chelsea is one of the fastest-growing areas in Alabama. In 1996, when Chelsea became a city, the population was 900; today, that number has swelled to 6,500.

Realtor Bill Wisener, associate broker at Cornerstone Properties, was one of the first developers to recognize Chelsea's potential in the late 1980s. He was involved in developing and marketing some of the first subdivisions in the area, including High Chaparral, Yellow Leaf and Brookchase.

"At first, people thought we were crazy to build in Chelsea, but we could read the future. We knew that it was time for the area to grow," he said. "Chelsea has experienced a very steady growth over the years, and now it is really booming. We are still building and developing there. We have taken the ball and are now running for a touchdown."

In Lakewood, one Cornerstone community, 80 of 145 homesites have been sold. Houses in Lakewood have three or four bedrooms, with 2,500 to 3,500 square feet, and prices ranging from \$360,000 to \$600,000.

Chelsea Ridge, another Cornerstone property, has 40 homes under construction out of a planned 150 lots. The three-bedroom, two-bath houses have prices beginning at \$259,000.

Chelsea is also attracting commercial development, including several shopping centers with restaurants. A new Wal-Mart Supercenter is scheduled to open in February.

City officials are monitoring the explosion of growth to ensure that they can continue to offer residents the best of all worlds - the space they desire, along with necessities, conveniences and other amenities.

“One of the main reasons that Chelsea has grown so much is our mayor, Earl Niven,” said Wanninger. “He is a superb leader, a visionary who knows where we need to go and how to make that happen. I am very grateful to be working with him.”

Wanninger has been city clerk for 10 years, so he has seen all the remarkable changes that have happened over the last decade. “I was so happy to see the opening of our new city hall, because our city office used to be on the second floor of the First National Bank building. Our entire space was about seven feet wide and 13 feet long.”

The new Chelsea City Hall opened in August 2005. The building includes the mayor’s office, along with other city offices, the library, a council meeting room and work room. “The new City Hall was planned for growth, to support a population of 13,000 to 15,000 people,” he said.

The city is also building a multi-purpose field for baseball, softball, football and soccer on Shelby 39 at Chelsea Recreational Park. Plans include a play area, pavilion and a three-quarter-mile walking trail with a nature trail where school children can study plants indigenous to the area, Wanninger said.

The Chelsea school system continues to grow, as well. A new 110,000 square-foot Chelsea Park Elementary School is under construction inside the Chelsea Park neighborhood on a 25-acre site donated by developer Eddleman Properties. Chelsea Park is a 3,000-house subdivision offering homes in a variety of sizes and prices.

“In the school situation, we broke ground with the school simultaneously with the houses in the development, which doesn’t always happen,” said Doug Eddleman, president of Eddleman Properties. “The Chelsea school board was very progressive in putting the school in the center of our community.”