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COURTESY OF WILLOWSFORD; ISTOCKPHOTO/JOHNNY87



Willowsford, still under development in Northern Virginia, is wooing residents with a working farm and thousands of acres of open space. The “agrihood” may become the new blueprint for large-scale communities.

BY JOE CANTLUPE



Valerie Simon rushed to tell her husband Esan about a community in the Washington, D.C., area she found online. It was a new, sprawling, 4,000-acre development with 40 miles of trails through dense woodlands, a 7-acre lake, brooks, community centers, a gym, and, in the middle of it all, a working farm.

She knew then that’s where they would move with their three young children, ages 8, 6, and 4. The 300-acre farm really grabbed her attention.

“We were looking at Maryland and Northern Virginia, just all over,” recalls Esan Simon, a physician who was relocating his family from Florida for a public health service position. “When we found this online, my wife was done. She was sold. We eat organic foods, and there’s an organic farm stand right there.”

The Simons moved into Willowsford Homeowners Association in Loudoun County, Va., nearly a year ago. Esan Simon is almost giggly when talking about where he lives.

“My wife goes to the farm stand every week, and we haven’t gotten to a grocery store since I don’t know when. That’s just amazing,” says Simon, 45. “Seriously, the tomatoes are like butter, and the spinach, I haven’t tasted anything like it. We know where our food is coming from.”





ut there's more to it, Simon adds, noting the uniqueness of the homes and the amenities. "The kids love to play outside. There's the playground, the zip lines, the sledding hill, and a pool. It's amazing—like a resort," he says. "People play outside and talk to you and don't go and stick their head down when you walk by."

THINKING FRESH

Willowsford, located west of Washington Dulles International Airport and south of Leesburg, Va., is still under development. More than 750 homes have been built, and 900 owners have signed up to move in. Its final plan calls for 2,100 homes, which is expected in five years. The homes, built in many styles and from different builders, range from 1,716 to 5,289 square feet and are priced between \$600,000 to \$1.5 million.

Willowsford has four villages and two community centers with resort-style pools, fitness facilities, and indoor and outdoor kitchens.

Amidst Willowsford's 2,000 acres of open space—and at the heart of the community—is the working farm.



The development is among a growing number of communities in the U.S. known as "agrihoods" or "agritopias" that embrace the farm-to-table lifestyle—farming and providing food for the housing right next door. Some see these developments as emerging alternatives to the typical subdivisions, especially as residents demand open space and recreation instead of solely golf courses and tennis clubs.

"We're trying to show open space but not just lawns and playgrounds. We have that, too, and intensely landscaped lands around our amenities. We have a lake and much more ground around it," says Mark Trostle, president of the Willowsford Homeowners Association and the Willowsford Conservancy, which controls the farm and open space. "We want people to make that connection where the food comes from and what's on their table.

Residents can see the food being produced and meet the people who produce it. They can see the vegetables and fruits on their way home, stopping at the farm stand to check what's been picked that day."

Rebecca Lyons, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, the association's manager, says the open spaces and farm-to-table culture have been big draws for residents.

"We're not about managing fairways; we're about wildflowers. Each is wonderful in their own way, but this is what works for us and what the residents come here for," says Lyons.

To help encourage farm-to-table living, a culinary director runs a demonstration kitchen with cooking classes at the two community centers, and residents can pick their own produce on the farm. The community also has a farm-garden



demonstration area for interested residents. Children can participate in a junior chef program. Willowsford officials say parents talk about how stunned they are when their kids who previously wouldn't eat vegetables suddenly love them. A California winemaker has given a seminar about his craft and worked with the community's chef on a five-course meal. In addition, Loudoun County and Fairfax County schools receive training from Willowsford's culinary director on incorporating fresh foods into school lunches.

Other events include picnics, dances, and special food celebrations. One farm stand is open, and a second is being developed.

Willowsford focuses on the open spaces as well as the environment beyond the farm. It employs a conservancy ranger who is dedicated to the planning, development, and management of a trail system; the community has designated trails for mountain biking along with those for hiking, walking, and jogging. Stocked ponds, campsites, and ecology tours are additional draws, and if a resident wants to control some unruly grass on his or her property, a goat—dubbed an ambassador—can be used to help.

Only certain sections of the community have streetlights, invoking the “dark-sky principle” so residents can sit in their backyards and enjoy the moon and star-burnished sky at nightfall.

FOUNDING THE FARM

Before the community was being built five years ago, it was farmland, rugged terrain, and wetlands. Loudoun County's zoning required that at least half of the community be open space. Now, Willowsford works to make a seamless transition between its residents and the natural life around them, although it's a complex operation.

“The farm was an integral part of the whole idea of the community's branding and what we are trying to demonstrate almost as a pilot project,” Trostle says.



“We're hoping it becomes a blueprint for other communities—to show what can be done at this density.”

Willowsford is a relatively low-density subdivision; on average, there are 2 acres for every lot. The farm and the conser-

vancy were created to be stewards of the 2,000 open acres. “We wanted productive ways of using the open space that would be beneficial to the community and the land and help the conservancy be self-sustaining,” says Trostle.

The community has drawn buyers throughout the Washington, D.C., region and beyond, and while the developers expected to draw millennials, they were surprised by the influx of older and middle-aged residents from up and down the East Coast.

“We have folks moving out of Fairfax (County, Va.) for their final dream home, and they are still connected to the culture of D.C.,” Trostle says. “But they want to get away from the hustle and bustle. The young families that come here want a connection to the farm and more rural access for their kids to play in the fields and forests. We didn't get as many middle-aged people with kids as we expected, and we definitely drew more folks from outside the area than we expected.”

Trostle is thrilled at the prospects ahead for the community.

“It's definitely catching on, and we've had multiple folks, even from Europe, ask what we're doing and what's making it successful. We weren't the pioneers of this,” he says. “Some (other developments) have actual farm owners in the community, and some are like us where the community runs the farm.”



Ironically, the Willowsford site was originally supposed to be a 15,000-resident subdivision and golf course, according to an Urban Land Institute report. Those plans were derailed in 2007 in the face of zoning restrictions. County officials refused to change their master plan, which limited the development to no more than one unit for every one to three acres. “In addition, the housing recession was well underway at the time, making the proposed project no longer viable as planned,” the Urban Land Institute report stated.

New owners of the property in 2009 worked with a development manager to change the plans.

“Working within the zoning framework and informed by consumer research, the developer decided to move forward with a plan for a master-planned community of single-family homes that preserved more than half the land in conservancy-managed open space for agricultural and recreational uses,” the Urban Land Institute report said. As a result, it created a “branded destination, Willowsford.”

The Willowsford Homeowners Association governs the homes and properties around them, including some of the trails. The Willowsford Conservancy operates the farm, open space, and additional trails. The association and conservancy work together smoothly on issues of common interest, such as the trails and woodlands, according to Lyons.

Because the community is still growing, the association and conservancy boards are still evolving but consist mostly of developer representatives. Each board has one resident member.

The association is in financial transition too.

“This is the first year we aren’t planning any subsidy from the developer. We’re looking to sustain financially with the association, which is big,” says Lyons, noting that the community aims to continually “think outside the box” and minimize fiscal waste. “We want to plan ahead and think long term—not to have major expenses and not be prepared for them.”

OPEN CONSERVATION

Meanwhile, the Willowsford Conservancy operates as a separate nonprofit organization and is self-funded partially by proceeds generated by the farm.





Residents also support the conservancy through registrations, volunteer efforts, and small contributions made at the time of resale. Each property owner is a conservancy member and has a stake in preserving the land.

The farm grows more than 150 varieties of vegetables, herbs, fruits, and flowers. A community-supported agriculture (CSA) program sells shares for vegetables, eggs, poultry, flowers, and meat. CSA members pay about \$700 per year for a crate of produce delivered each week during the 30-week growing season. As of November, more than 300 people, including nonresidents, had signed up for the CSA membership. The farm stand also partners with other vendors to distribute locally grown cheese, milk, and ice cream.

The conservancy has formed an array of partnerships, including with local Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts troops that use the trails and organizations that sponsor races.

Eventually, there will be about 45 miles of natural surface, paved, mowed grass, and crushed aggregate trails weaving through the community.

“There are just wonderful and unexpected encounters (on the trails and woodlands),” says Iris Gestram, executive director of the conservancy.



There have been plenty of foxes, deer, cranes, snakes, and even a bear or two spotted in the community. “Hopefully, we can restore, attract, and support more wildlife,” she says.

Gestram says the community and conservancy work to educate residents about their surroundings and on what Willowsford is trying to accomplish.

“I think a lot of our residents come to

Willowsford because of the farm and the open space,” Gestram adds. “You have to understand the biology and know this is real nature and real farming, and there can be surprises.”

As residents get comfortable, they’ll “find these magical moments themselves,” she says. **CG**

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