

Who Needs a Golf Course? New Housing Developments Feature Farms

By: Jessica Placzek
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It used to be that farms were cleared to make way for housing developments. Now, developments are making room for farms. Agricultural neighborhoods — or agrihoods — are neighborhoods with urban farms. They are being sown across California, and buyers are eating them up.

Davis is home to one of the newest agrihoods, The Cannery. While The

Cannery offers 10 miles of bike paths and plenty of open space for kids to play, it's the 7.5-acre farm that's received the most attention.

“That barn when you first enter, it just gives you a warm wonderful feeling. I just love the whole concept of what they have with the farm,” says Livia Hamrah, who was looking through one of the homes with her sister.

Developers who have been offering golf courses and swimming pools for years say that their customers are looking for something new. In California, consumers want green, organic, sustainable and local products. So it's no surprise that they are loving the urban farm.

“In 30 years of building homes, I've never had the opportunity to build a barn before,” says Kevin Carson, president of the Northern California division of New Home Co., which developed The Cannery.

Homes there range from \$400,000 to over \$1 million. While many of the residents might like the idea of farming, it would be unreasonable to expect them to quit their day jobs. It seems they will more likely post farm pictures on Facebook than actually farm.

That's where Mary Kimball comes in. She is executive director of the Center for Land-Based Learning. The center is partnering with The Cannery to help run the farm. Kimball's organization will provide two or three California Farm Academy graduates to work the land and turn it into a money-making business.

“We want it to be a farm that is able to sustain itself over time,” says Kimball.

The New Home Co. will help underwrite the first three years of farm operations and help pay for

resident workshops and volunteer days.

“It’s not a community farm,” Kimball says.

People can’t “walk the rows and pick and harvest what they want anytime day or night.”

In addition to homebuyers, farms are also attractive to city officials. Kimball believes the farm helped gain approval for the development as a whole.

“The farm was really the shining star, and it consistently came up at the top of everyone’s list as to why this particular project should move forward,” says Kimball.

Turning industrial land into farmland has had its own set of problems. Decades of wasting away under concrete resulted in poor soil quality. Developers and farmers had to dig up the first 3 feet of soil and replace it with nutrient-rich soil from neighboring farms.

Davis isn’t the only city where developers are opening agrihoods. In South Orange County, there’s Rancho Mission Viejo. It’s a 23,000-acre working ranch with cattle and produce that includes 63,000 lemon trees.

“It’s that millennial generation who’s enjoying that culinary experience,” says Amaya Genaro of Rancho Mission Viejo. She says there are currently about 1,500 residents.

Rancho Mission Viejo has been experimenting with community farming among its older residents, but Genaro says it expects to woo millennials with the recent opening of its second agrihood.

“They’re kinda dubbed the foodie generation and they want to really eat healthy,” Genaro says.

“They want to teach their children to eat healthy. And also really to teach their children, you know, even where food comes from.”

Currently, Rancho Mission Viejo provides its residents with moon hikes, falconry, astronomy and ecology classes.

Rancho Mission Viejo aims to eventually build 14,000 homes in its agrihoods. Elsewhere in California, agrihoods have been proposed in Santa Clara and Sacramento.

CORRECTION: Kimball’s organization has no association with University of California Davis.

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<http://ww2.kqed.org/news/2015/10/29/the-farm-is-the-new-golf-course>