

Urban villages seek to provide city convenience, country comforts

By [Natalie Singer](#)

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MARIA CARLSON CAN STILL PICTURE her 1960s childhood: Houses packed tightly on a quiet Whidbey Island street, kids who played tag until it was too dark to see their own hands. Neighbors laughing across fenceless yards as they pulled weeds and tinkered with cars.

It was a yearning for that neighborhood connection that lured Carlson and her husband, Bruce, out of their aging Lake City house to one of three social experiments sprouting in the Eastside's back yard.

Promising not only new homes but also new hometown lifestyles, these so-called "urban villages" — Snoqualmie Ridge, Redmond Ridge and Issaquah Highlands — aim to marry the affordability and family focus of traditional suburban developments with the density and convenience of city life.

Streets are narrow, more Queen Anne than Bellevue. Community parks make up for small back yards. Shops, schools and office jobs will be within walking distance of the classic-style homes. Yet it's all set among rural forests and streams.

The three projects — the first of their kind in King County — are about half completed. But their developers are betting the approach will cut down on the traffic, pollution and isolation of suburban sprawl.

And the quality of life in the villages is being touted as better than in traditional suburbs: With 12,000 residents already, they boast built-in networks of clubs and activities and pedestrian-friendly layouts designed to get residents out of their cars and into each others' living rooms. "Come for the view, stay for the friends," sings one homebuilder's ad.

People like the Carlsons are eating it up: The three developments are adding cars, kids and countertops to the Eastside at an unprecedented pace. And they could eventually add 12,000 more homes and up to 31,000 people to an area that had mostly trees and squirrels less than a decade ago.

But not everyone is thrilled. Environmentalists complain that forests and animal habitat were gobbled up to make way for houses and roads. Longtime rural residents feel their quiet lifestyle slipping away as thousands of new commuters pile onto already cramped roads.

And many worry that the villages, at least so far, haven't delivered what they advertise: Though promised as places where residents could "live, work and play," more than five years after ground was broken the developments' retail and office components still lag far behind the housing.



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Kids living in the Snoqualmie Ridge development didn't have to go far for soccer camp last week. Megan Ellstrom of Skyhawks sports academies, center, signing a T-shirt for a player, said most of the participants attending camp walked from nearby homes.

As the bulldozers roll forward and experts wait to judge the final product, the modern-day pioneers living on this new suburban frontier are heartily pursuing their goal: creating an old-fashioned city in the country.

Book clubs, coffee klatches

Head east on Interstate 90 to Exit 25, up the new four-lane parkway carved into the hillside, and Snoqualmie Ridge announces itself with a low stone sign that almost melts into the woodland behind it.

Once inside, it's clear that people, not cars, are king. Cul-de-sacs are conspicuously absent, frowned upon because they isolate residents. Dry cleaners and sandwich shops face the sidewalk, not the parking lot. Homes are set back on small lots, creating buffers between front doors and the road.

Just off the main thoroughfare, past rows of manicured hedges, is a storefront coffeehouse where moms sit roundtable, stay-at-home workers peck at laptops and retired couples sip lattes before heading to the trailhead.

It's the kind of amenity that helps draw people together, said Bill Boucher, a vice president with Quadrant Homes, developer of both Ridge villages. "It's not social engineering, it's a natural community."

But as the only java shop for the village of 4,000, Bibo's Coffee is overwhelmed by that community. Morning lines sometimes wrap around the building.

As they wait, Bibo's patrons stare across the street at a dirt field — one of many dusty swaths of undeveloped land — where they might one day go to buy groceries. For now, the closest supermarket is miles away in Issaquah or North Bend.

And residents like Maria Carlson have learned that though town centers, parks and book clubs help, those alone don't create a sense of belonging.

"You've got to go across the street and introduce yourself, or go to the park, or throw a party," said Carlson. "You can build a community that facilitates that, but you still have to put yourself out there."

Though all three developments feature common areas and group amenities, each has its own style.

Luxury fairway homes on Snoqualmie Ridge's Jack Nicklaus golf course start in the low millions, although a handful of homes, including some built by Habitat for Humanity, are priced for those earning below the median income.

Issaquah Highlands has received much attention for its "built green" homes, which feature hydraulic heating, solar power and natural materials. It's also the most dense of the three, with an average of just over six units per residential acre — 30 times as dense as some nearby areas but nowhere near as tightly packed as Seattle's Capitol Hill.



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Rielely VanCampen, 8, shows off some salamanders to his mother, Stephanie VanCampen, after getting off the school bus near his Snoqualmie Ridge home in June. The family has lived in the new "urban-village" development for about a year.

Farther north, Redmond Ridge houses a diverse population of more than 20 nationalities. Two adjacent developments called Trilogy and the Village at Redmond Ridge (one by the same developer, the other a joint venture), are being built for active retirees.

All of the villages are surrounded by forests and wetlands. Nancy Tipton, a former Seattleite, just has to pull open her sliding-glass door to remind herself why she left her city condo last year: Outside the four-bedroom home in a stand of alders is a marshy pond, with plentiful fish and a duck couple that won't stop bickering.

"I've died and gone to heaven," she said.

Substitute for suburbs

The urban-village concept first cropped up in the Puget Sound region in 1994 when Northwest Landing opened in Dupont, south of Tacoma, turning a speck of an historic town into a bustling, 5,000-person city with a village green and two major employers, State Farm and Intel.

Since then, other villages have cropped up around the region. Many refer to the style of these communities as "New Urbanism," a school of design that stresses housing density and pedestrians over cars.

New Urbanism developments hearken back to pre-World War II, when neighborhoods were walkable and had their own mix of housing, stores and services, said John Norquist, president of the Congress for the New Urbanism, a Chicago-based nonprofit that works with architects and planners to implement its principles.

The communities are proliferating around the country, driven by a generational change among homebuyers.

Working parents often prefer a string of nearby "pocket parks" to a huge lawn they don't have time to mow, and busy suburban homebuyers want to be close to shopping and nature. Many, like the Carlsons, crave the small-town feeling of their youth as well as the convenience of the city.

Traditional suburbs just don't have "the same cachet as in the 1950s," said Rob Steuteville, editor and publisher of New Urban News. "Many buyers now would much rather have an urban-style place."

In Washington, growth-management laws are an added motivation: King County's urban-growth boundary, drawn in 1994, put a hard limit on how much land is available for development.

In exchange for exceptions to local zoning rules that limit the number of housing units per acre, developers offer open space, parks and trails, roads, sites for future schools and even the preservation of other land owned by the company.

Protected space is often the key to support, or at least acceptance, from environmental groups. "It's a bargaining chip," said Nancy Keith, executive director of the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust, which works to protect a 100-mile scenic and recreation corridor along Interstate 90.



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Katie Hambrick, left, and McKenzie Hoffman make drinks at Bibo's Coffee in Snoqualmie Ridge. As a coffee shop and gathering spot serving 4,000 households, Bibo's keeps busy.

Still, the location of the developments — just inside the growth boundary in the case of Snoqualmie Ridge and Issaquah Highlands, and within a rural, no-growth area for Redmond Ridge — has caused friction.

"There are some good design elements, but the question is: Should they be there at all, or should they be closer to Seattle?" said Tim Trohimovich, planning director with 1,000 Friends of Washington, which works to protect open space and prevent sprawl.

Others say the half-built communities don't provide enough amenities to cut down significantly on commutes and shopping trips to the outside.

"Instead of plopping a new city in a rural land, we can build out other areas" first, said John Mauro, director of Livable Communities Coalition of Seattle, which pushes sustainable communities.

"Bullying the land"?

For some on the outside, life has been growing louder ever since construction on the three developments began. Traffic concerns top the list.

"It's insane. I can't take a left turn out of here," said Pepper Bain, who lives west of Redmond Ridge along the Eastside's rural rim. "I don't use my deck anymore, it's so loud."

Volumes on Novelty Hill Road, which links Redmond Ridge and other rural residents to downtown Redmond, rose from an average 14,700 vehicles a day in 1999 to 20,500 last year.

Others have complained of environmental impacts. Linda and John Seebeth, who live down the road from Issaquah Highlands, were among its earliest opponents. They say nearby Pole Creek dried up last year for the first time, which they attribute to construction at the Highlands. "It's kind of this mentality in bullying the land," Linda Seebeth said. "When that's being done, are we accomplishing what we wanted?"

A group of residents near Redmond Ridge who feel their rural lifestyles are being threatened has been fighting a bitter nine-year legal battle to halt the developments. Called the Friends of the Law, the group failed to stop current construction, but its lawsuit threw into doubt expansion of the Ridge's second phase and adjacent retirement community.

The urban villages are a blessing and a curse to their local governments, absorbing required growth and bringing in amenities and property taxes, but also costing millions in new services. School districts, cities and police departments are still adjusting.

Works in progress

If the Eastside's giant new communities paint a picture of the suburbs' future, the portrait is unfinished.

At Issaquah Highlands, fewer than half the planned homes are built, and hardly any retail or services for residents exist. The community was designed, and marketed, with Microsoft in mind: The software giant has the option to buy over 150 acres in the Highlands, where it has said it would put 29 buildings and 14,000 employees.

But it's unclear when, if ever, Microsoft will start building; plans for the campus are on hold even as the software giant builds a huge new campus in India.

Snoqualmie Ridge and Redmond Ridge also are years away from completion.

Planners and design experts are reluctant to judge the villages before they're finished. But the sluggish progress of the retail and commercial components has some concerned.

"I think they sold a bill of goods, and I think the people in the village are going to suffer for that," said Connie Marsh, secretary of the Issaquah Environmental Council, a private group that has criticized Issaquah Highlands.

Judd Kirk, president of Highlands developer Port Blakely Communities, admits the delay of commercial development has been disappointing. He said residents have "always known the market would affect the timing." Kirk says the end result — a place where people can live, work and play — will be worth the wait.

In the long run, the New Urbanism model could reshape the way new suburbia looks in the Puget Sound region and around the state, said Anne Aurelia Fritzel, a planner at the state's Growth Management Services office. "You're just going to have to wait for a while for it to mature."

Life in "Pleasantville"

Six years after they moved to Snoqualmie Ridge, the Carlsons have seen many of the dreams that drove them there fulfilled. They had a little girl. Their free time is occupied by neighborhood barbecues, bunco games and book-club gatherings. Bruce Carlson works from home and plays in a neighborhood band he started.

Behind their house is their all-important alley, the bull's-eye of community connection the couple was searching for: Back yards bordered with low, picket fences overlook a well-lit central lane where kids play, moms pull weeds and dads wash cars. Maria Carlson calls the alley "party central."

But there are still questions. The couple hopes the planned elementary school, now under construction, will be up and running by fall 2005, in time for daughter **Natalie** to head to kindergarten. Crowding at the middle school in old Snoqualmie forced the district to bus some of the village's children five miles to Fall City.

Some ballfields promised early on were instead installed in old Snoqualmie, Carlson said. And, like many of their neighbors, the Carlsons would like to be able to buy dinner ingredients without leaving the community.

"Just because a developer shows you a map with things on it, it doesn't mean those will actually occur," Maria Carlson said.



BRIAN CASSELLA / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Although parts of Snoqualmie Ridge are inhabited, the first phase won't be finished until 2007. Homes prices range from \$230,000 to over \$1 million.

Overall, urban-village living has exceeded their expectations. They jokingly refer to the place as Pleasantville, the too-perfect 1950s town depicted in a 1998 movie.

"Sometimes," she said, "we look around and say, 'Is this real?'"

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