

THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

SOUTH FLORIDA

January 16-22, 2004 • \$2.00

southflorida.bizjournals.com



MARK FREERKS

Wilton Station's VP Tom Bluth, director William Thies III, President George Galluzzo and developer Jim Ellis.

Here comes the neighborhood

BY ED DUGGAN

When architect Vernon Pierce built his home in Wilton Manors in 1988, it was the only residential permit pulled that year.

"The area was low profile, mostly built out in the '60s and '70s, and a bedroom community for people who worked in Fort Lauderdale," said Pierce, who now heads his own Fort Lauderdale-based architectural firm.

Times have changed.

The city has ranked in Broward's top two slots for property value increases in each of the last five years.

Now the city of 12,697 is getting a wave of 500 new or rehabbed residential projects - with Pierce's firm at its leading edge.

A big factor in the city's transformation is an influx of gay residents. By some estimates, gays currently make



up a third to 40 percent of the population. The city has gained attention for being only the second nationally to have an openly gay majority on the city council.

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Urban village emerges in Broward's 'Island City'

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But the city also has a small-town ambiance and location just north of downtown Fort Lauderdale that developers are using to seek a broad cross-section of buyers.

Wilton Manors is nicknamed "The Island City" because it is located between the two forks of the Middle River, which gives it an abundance of waterfront property and distinct boundaries. The influx of new residents has helped turn Wilton Drive into an urban village with an array of restaurants, shops and businesses.

Beer distribution hub transformed

Pierce's 15-member architectural group beat out four other architectural firms to win the planning and design work on the former William Thies & Sons beer distribution site. The 10-acre parcel - now called Wilton Station - is in the Five Points area of Wilton Manors, where Northeast 26th Street, Wilton Drive and Dixie Highway intersect.

It's the largest Wilton Manors residential development, planned or under way, and is expected to top \$110 million at sellout.

"The developers went about it the right way," said Mayor Jim Stork, who also owns a cafe in the city. "They listened to input from the people, the commissioners and the planners, and have come up with an amazing New Urbanism project."

Wilton Station will contain townhomes, lofts, tower suites and multi-level brownstones. It features 58 garages, 272 air-conditioned 7-by-11 stor-

Stork

PIERCE ARCHITECTURAL GROUP
 Principal: Vernon Pierce
 Address: 800 S. Andrews Ave., Fort Lauderdale 33306
 Phone: (954) 763-4668
 E-mail: vpierce@pagpa.com

WILTON STATION LLC
 Co-developer: Jim F. Ellis
 Web site: www.wiltonstation.com
 Sales center: 1409 N.E. 26th St., Wilton Manors 33305 (opening mid-February)
 Phone: (954) 522-5700
 E-mail: jimfellis@aol.com

THE GALLERIA COLLECTION
 President: Paul McRae
 Address: 945 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale 33301
 Phone: (954) 229-2222

VILLA ESCONDIDA AT WILTON MANORS, SAVANNAH LANDINGS, REAL LOFTS AT WILTON MANORS
 Co-developer: Paul Hugo
 Phone: (954) 270-7777

NEW URBAN COMMUNITIES
 Sales representative: Penny Marks
 Web site: www.newurbancommunities.com
 Sales office: 2360 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors 33305 (opening March)
 Phone: (754) 234-5900



PROJECTS IN WILTON MANORS

- 1. WILTON STATION:** 9.4 acres, 272 residential units; 20 units
- 2. VILLA ESCONDIDA AT WILTON MANORS:** 3020 N.E. 5th Terrace; 12 townhomes
- 3. SAVANNAH LANDINGS** 2825 N.E. 6th Ave.; six homes
- 4. REAL LOFTS OF WILTON MANORS** on N.E. 28th Street, between 8th and 9th Avenues; 22 lofts
- 5. HERON HOUSE** N.E. 8th Avenue and 28th Street; 20 units
- 6. THE GROVE, 2600 N.E. 8th Ave.;** 56 units
 6a. GROVE EXTENSION, 24 units plus
- 7. GLEN WRIGHT** Behind Shoppes of Wilton Manors; 16 homes
- 8. BELLE ISLE** 2360 Wilton Drive; 60 units
- 9. DUVAL VILLAS** 2704 9th Ave.; 23 townhomes

age units and 16 poolside cabanas.

A small commercial stretch of 18,000 square feet fronts Northeast 26th Street and can be divided up into individual rental space. It is separated from the gated residential community.

The heart of the community is Club W.S., a multimillion-dollar recreation center with a 90,000-gallon, resort-style swimming pool that will be ringed by cabanas. A 72-foot lap area, a rock waterfall and two spas complete the scene.

The property will have a more than 300-foot boardwalk on the North Fork of the Middle River, which provides opportunities for boating, canoeing and kayaking.

The first phase of the project is self-financed by the five developers, who make Ellis, a veteran real estate developer and former Blockbuster executive; Dr. George Galluzzo, a dentist; Thomas Bluth, an attorney and CPA; John Custer, a retired contractor and mentor to the group; and William Thies III, a developer with Litening Properties and one of the former property owners.

The Galleria Collection, a 60-member real estate firm headquartered in Fort Lauderdale with \$356 million in sales last year, will handle sales.

"We are taking 'expressions of interest' to build up a contact list right now," said Paul McRae, president of The Galleria Collection. The on-site sales office should be open in early to mid-February.

Pre-construction prices are expected to start in the mid- to upper-\$200,000s for the first phase of 92 residences, although prices will not be firm until the sales center opens.

Sale of the garages and cabanas is expected to be by lottery.

Stiles Corp. is the general contractor and construction is estimated to get under way in June.

Keeping the railroad theme

Located along the Florida East Coast Railway line, a 16- to 17-foot high buffer wall will be built to muffle the sound.

"I used to live 600 to 700 feet away from the property," Pierce said. "We got used to the train noise very quickly and just didn't notice it all after a while."

In any case, the architect and developers chose to confront the railroad head on.

"We named the property Wilton Station because of its railroad heritage and each of the six buildings is named after a prominent railroad," Pierce said.

Recently Wilton Station ads were run in both the Sunday *New York Times*, which has a circulation of 1.7 million, and *The Advocate*, a gay publication with circulation of 125,000.

as many inquiries from *The Advocate's* readers as *The Times*," said John Patrick, VP of marketing for Wilton Station. "That tells us that there is substantial interest as Wilton Manors is known as a gay-friendly community."

But, he notes, "We'll be selling to a wide range of buyers."

Replacing a trailer park

There are other projects under way, too. Boca Raton-based New Urban Communities will build Belle Isle, 60 townhomes on three acres at 2360 Wilton Drive, replacing a former trailer park. Prices range from the mid-\$300,000s to the high \$500,000s and more than half are already sold. The nine townhomes fronting Wilton Drive are three-story, 2,000-square-foot live-work units. They feature ground-floor commercial space with two stories of residential above.

Glen Schecher, Realtor with the Keyes Co. and developer with Highland Properties LLC, recently broke ground on The Grove, 56 fully-gutted and rebuilt condo conversion units at 2600 N.E. Eighth Ave. Priced from \$157,000, they are more than 70 percent sold on word-of-mouth alone.

Schecher has an additional 24-unit building on the west side of Northeast Eighth Avenue for conversion and a nearby acre of land for townhouses.

Vanlan Development, managed by Robert Jolley, is building 23 townhomes at 2704 N.E. Ninth Ave., in the low to mid-\$300,000s. All but one have been sold.



Completion is expected in April or May.

Developer Glen Wright plans to build 1 single-family Victorian and Georgian homes behind the Shoppes of Wilton Manors.

Developers Robert Mannino and Paul Hugo are active in three infill spots:

Villa Escondida at Wilton Manors located at 3020 N.E. Fifth Terrace, has 12 townhomes, which are 50 percent sold and are priced from \$349,500 to \$359,500.

Savannah Landings, located at 2825 N.E. Sixth Ave., includes six single-family waterfront homes, priced from \$550,000 to \$650,000 and are all reserved with back-up contracts, according to the developers. Groundbreaking is estimated for March.

Real Lofts of Wilton Manors is located on Northeast 28th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues across from a rehabbed park. It is an accumulation of five parcels for 22 lofts, sized from 1,500 to 2,300 square feet. The ceilings are 22 feet to 35 feet high. Pre-construction prices range from \$299,000 to \$389,000.

"It's unbelievable, the growth that's happening all around Wilton Manors," said Rick Miller, co-owner with his wife of Barton & Miller Cleaners on Northeast 26th Avenue at the apex of Five Points, just west of Wilton Station. "This business was started by my father and his partner in 1956 when Wilton Manors was the wilderness. Now it's grown into a real hometown."

E-MAIL RESIDENTIAL real estate writer Ed Duggan at edduggan@bizjournals.com.