

# Florida eco-friendly town opens for business

March 22 2017, by Kerry Sheridan

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The interior of a model home at Florida's eco-friendly community of Babcock Ranch, which includes a solar farm and the latest in energy efficient homes and vehicles

With a farm-to-table restaurant, driverless shuttles, homes built with the latest green techniques and a massive solar farm to offset energy use, Florida's first sustainable town is now open for business.

The buzz about Babcock Ranch, an eco-friendly city of the future and the largest development of its kind in the United States, drew more than

15,000 people out this month for a peek.

"We are building a new town from the ground up and that just doesn't happen very often," said Syd Kitson, a retired American football player who dreamed up the vision for Babcock Ranch over a decade ago.

"We can do it right from the very beginning, and that is what we have set out to do," he told AFP.

Kitson bought the 93,000-acre (38,000-hectare) ranch in southwestern Florida in 2006.

He sold most of the land to the state as a wildlife preserve, keeping 18,000 acres for his plan to build an environmentally friendly town on one half, setting aside the other half for open spaces and nature.

Then, the [global financial crisis](#) struck in 2007 and Kitson's plans ground to a halt.

But as the economy recovered, builders regained interest in the project and began purchasing parcels.

Momentum began to accelerate in the last few years.

Bulldozers are still a common sight and vast empty spaces remain, but builders are hard at work erecting homes that in the next two decades will host a community of some 50,000 people.



An electric shuttle gets a charge at Babcock Ranch, Florida's first sustainable town with farm-to-table restaurant, homes with the latest green tech and a massive solar farm

"The first phase is going much quicker than we thought," Kitson said.

"You are going to see a lot of people living here very, very quickly."

## **Futuristic features**

A handful of model homes have been completed, and during a two-day Founders Fest this month, visitors streamed in and out to see the latest in energy-efficient designs, along with outdoor kitchens, high ceilings, swimming pools and front porches with rocking chairs.

"It is beautiful," said visitor Jason Brewer, who came for a look around this time last year and said he is amazed at how much work has been done since then.

"People are excited to see how things are going to turn out," he said.

The first home—a brand new lakefront house with two bedrooms and a den—was recently sold to a pair of retirees for \$460,000, about twice the average home sale price in the area, located north of Fort Myers on Florida's Gulf Coast.

The homeowners are expected to move into their new digs in May.

Some visitors expressed concern about the prices, and wondered if they'd ever be able to afford to buy there.



Syd Kitson, a retired football player, dreamed up the vision for Babcock Ranch, a sustainable city being built from the ground in Florida, over a decade ago

Babcock Ranch spokeswoman Lisa Hall said that in the coming years, a series of smaller villas and apartments are expected to be built with a price range of \$180,000 to \$220,000.

These lower-priced units will be mixed in with the larger homes, so as to avoid segregating the town according to residents' incomes, she said.

## Solar farm

A key feature of Babcock Ranch is the adjacent 440-acre [solar farm](#), which provides enough energy to the local utility, Florida Power and Light, to offset the energy use of nearly 20,000 homes.

Employees navigate the streets using electric cars, which they charge up with orange cords when parked.

A cherry-red, driverless, battery-powered shuttle called EasyMile, one of just a few in use across the country, is also being tested to transport up to 12 people at a time from place to place.

"Some people are nervous, others are excited" when they see a shuttle with no driver, said Neal Hemenover, chief information officer at TransDev North America.

The shuttle travels barely half a mile at a time, at a speed of less than 10 miles (16 kilometers) per hour, and stops automatically if anyone steps in front of it.

Otherwise, Babcock Ranch aims to be a walkable city with 50 miles of trails—five miles of which are now complete.



A key feature of Babcock Ranch, an eco-friendly city of the future in Florida, is the solar farm which provides enough to offset energy use of nearly 20,000 homes

A space for container gardens is already fenced off, and crops grown in the area will recycle irrigated water, said Hall.

The iconic feature of many Florida communities—a golf course—is not yet planned, but could be if enough golfers move in.

"If we do (a golf course), it will be operated to the highest standards of sustainability—irrigation with re-use, low-impact fertilization, etc.," said Hall.

A public elementary and middle school is being built, and should open in the late summer. It is already filled to capacity.

The notion of living in a brand new, sustainable town appealed to 14-year-old Abby White.

After kayaking on one of the new lakes, she paused for a bite to eat in the town's restaurant and told her mother how much she wanted to live there.

"It feels like what we need to do for our future," she said.

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