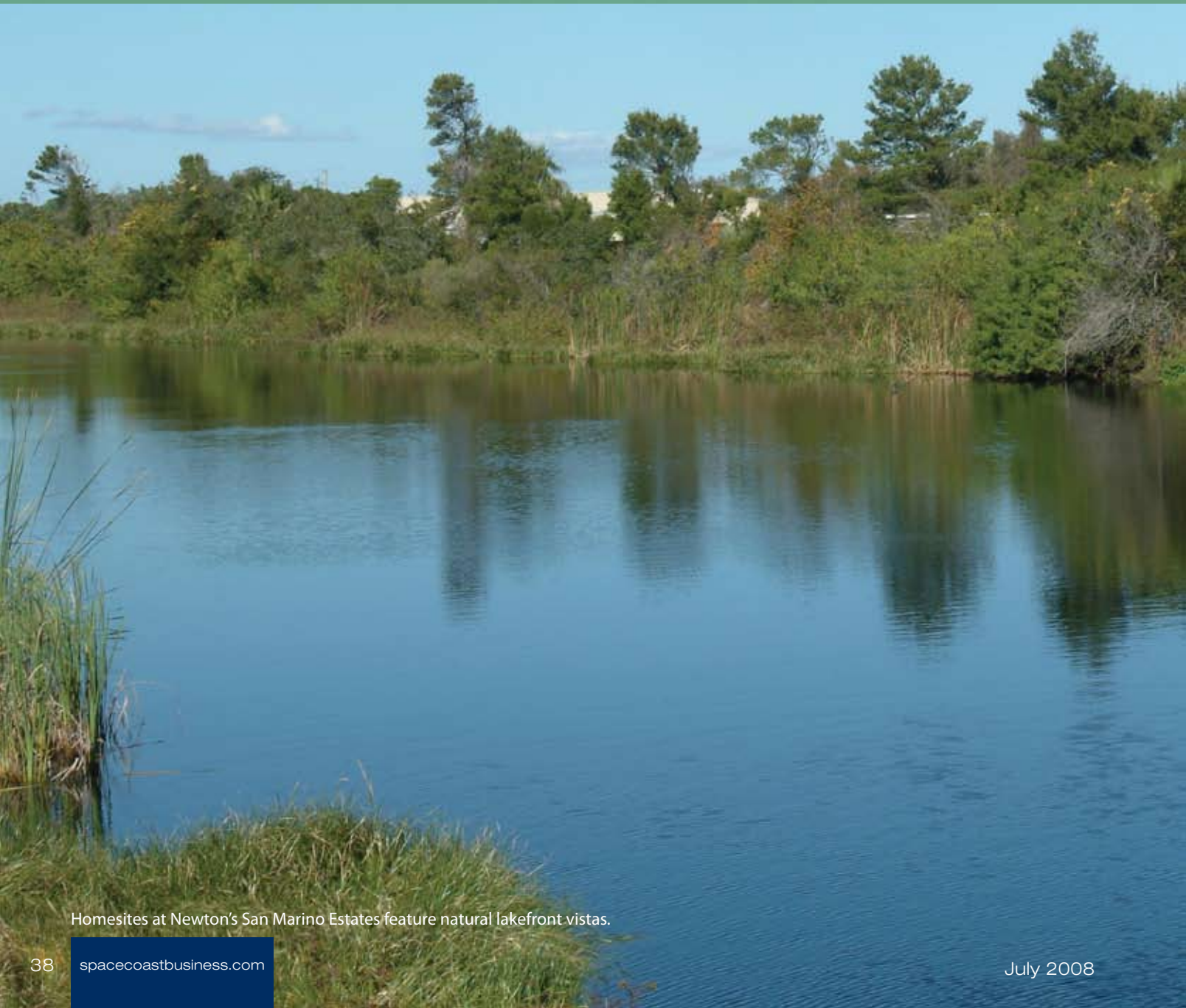


# newton

## Land Development

In Touch with the Environment

BY ANNE STRAUB



Homesites at Newton's San Marino Estates feature natural lakefront vistas.



Green building is not just a good idea, according to John Newton of Newton Land Development. It's a sound business practice.

Newton learned early in his career the value of an aesthetically pleasing product, having worked for CIA Developers building warehouse, office and flex space.

Founder Gary Cunningham made a practice of working with the trees on the site and building low-density projects, Newton said.

Even though razing the land and increasing density might have yielded more units, the move paid off.

"It was better to have few buildings. At the end of the day, it was rewarding because the people who were your tenants appreciated it," Newton said. "People stayed there. They didn't move on," he said.

Newton branched out on his own five years ago, seeking to fill a niche he saw in the market. CIA built and managed commercial space for rent; Newton wanted to create affordable space that business owners could buy.

But he continued to build with natural aesthetics in mind, a priority that came naturally to the former Eagle Scout and avid camper.

"Keeping it green is not something new. It's just something more people are starting to embrace," Newton said. "Some of us have been embracing it all our lives."



John Newton with San Marino Estates sales manager Rich Mehalick

He's putting that value at the forefront of his company's latest project, a residential community in North Melbourne.

Newton could have built 120 homes on the 61-acre tract, but he's limiting San Marino Estates to 79 homes. Instead of mitigation, a practice through which a developer can buy credits for preserved land elsewhere, Newton chose to preserve 21 acres of wetlands on the parcel. That preserve and a 15-acre lake will contribute to the feeling of being in a natural environment, he said. "It's secluded, right in the middle of everything," Newton said.

Unlike other communities, where houses line up along streets at a consistent setback, San Marino Estates features varied setbacks along winding roads. Homes must be at least 20 feet from the road, but most are set back at least 30 and some are 100 feet from the road. The technique increases privacy, as well as making the drive home more pleasant. "It creates a front-landscape that's more like a park," Newton said.

The concept is called "coving," and it's the brainchild of Rick Harrison, a Minneapolis land planner who designed the Melbourne community. He's promoting the idea as a way to plan better neighborhoods and take the monotony out of suburbia. "We broke the relationship between the house and the street," Harrison said.

So, instead of homes lining the curb, they meander and form attractive curves. The result is more green space, less road – and therefore less cost – without sacrificing density.

"Nature itself doesn't have straight lines. Maybe the property we purchase has straight lines, but nothing else does," he said. Getting away from constraints of straight lines helps developers maneuver around trees and sensitive areas more easily.

Newton sought him out to plan the community, a step Harrison wishes more developers would take. Most developers plan their communities in-house and resist new ideas, he said.

He's developing college courses and also has written a book, *Prefurbia*, to promote his land-planning philosophy.

A city's ordinances will state a purpose and intent to create attractive neighborhoods and eliminate monotony. Then they'll lay out distance requirements from the road and between homes. Unfortunately, the latter is the main part to which the traditional planners pay attention, Harrison said.

"No one looks at the purpose and intent," Harrison said. "The job is to jam every unit you can in there." Designing in the cove style is more artistic and less intuitive, proponents believe, so Harrison knows he faces a task of educating the design industry. "We want it to become a standard," he said.

Home sites at San Marino Estates vary from a quarter-acre to a half-acre in size and start at \$160,000. Newton is looking for custom builders who offer value and who are familiar with energy-efficient building methods.

"We're looking to work with builders who are already on the wavelength," Newton said.

Buyers also can use their own builders.

Newton expects the finished Mediterranean-style homes to be valued at \$400,000 and up, including the land.

He's been working on permitting the project for about five years, so he saw the housing market fire up and burn out during that time. But he still thinks there's a market for what he's offering.

Other new communities in Central Brevard are being built on low-lying areas where natural foliage is scarce.

San Marino Estates is on a sandy ridge, 10 feet above the water table, in a fully wooded tract of land. Community rules will not require that buyers build by a certain date, and undeveloped lots won't be cleared.

"Our neighborhood will stand out," Newton said.

His research shows only a six-month inventory of homes in Central Brevard at the \$400,000 to \$800,000 price point.

That's a better price range for Central Brevard than the recent trend toward more and more expensive homes. Only about 1.5 percent of Brevard residents can afford payments on a million-dollar mortgage and most people don't want the insurance and upkeep on such a residence.

"That sector of the market is way overbuilt," he said.

He sees an opportunity in marketing to employed empty nesters and young retirees who want a home in the 2,000- to 3,000-square-foot range.

Newton Land Development takes a similar approach to its commercial projects by building affordable space that maintains a natural aesthetic.

By using economies of scale and clustering projects in an area, he can save on engineering, design, permitting and construction costs and build office space that a small business owner can afford.

The business owner avoids the headache of building the space and, because of Newton's cost savings, doesn't pay any more to have someone else build it.

He's getting ready to start his fourth office condo project, The Floridian in Rockledge.

It will include seven buildings, each covering 6,000 square feet. Space can be divided into 1,000-square-foot increments, ideal for an accountant, insurance agent, dentist or other professional.

In an office condo arrangement, tenants own their space and share maintenance, management and insurance costs for the complex.

Newton decided early not to be the least expensive option, but to add value with extras like tile roofs, concrete construction and high-impact glass.

As in his residential development, he puts value on the intangibles.

"We wanted to do something that gives people something they'd be more proud of and they could enjoy more," he said. ♦



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**Mike Sarro, President/Broker**

Gulfstream Commercial Real Estate, Inc 3200 N. Wickham Road, Suite 7, Melbourne, FL 32935 Mike Sarro, Lic Real Estate Broker Office: 321-757-7676 Fax: 321-757-7254 Mobile: 321-266-7487

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