

THE NEWS-PRESS

Babcock blueprint is 90 percent green Plan preserves ranch's open areas

By [Betty Parker](#)

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PUNTA GORDA — Conceptual plans for Babcock Ranch show at least half of the 17,000 acres destined for development will stay in green and open space to help buffer small villages that surround a town center.

Combined with 73,000 acres the state plans to buy for preservation, that means about 90 percent of the ranch will remain undeveloped, West Palm Beach developer Syd Kitson said Tuesday when plans were unveiled.

Kitson, who has a contract to buy the ranch from the Babcock family, said he wants an environmentally friendly community "where open space and nature will be an integral part of daily life" for an eventual 40,000 residents.

"The country town is one of the great American institutions, and we want to bring back the character and community sentiment of the small hometown to Babcock Ranch," he said.

If all goes as planned, he said, work could begin in two to three years.

Kitson must sell the land to the state and get development approval from Lee and Charlotte counties before his plan can become reality. The ranch is in eastern Lee and Charlotte counties, with about 90 percent in Charlotte.

The state will pay about \$310 million, and Lee County about \$40 million, for the 73,000 acres.

A Senate committee voted unanimously Tuesday to put the \$310 million in the state budget.

The final state approval is expected in early April; Charlotte County has a hearing on comprehensive plan amendments for the project March 28.

The development faces further reviews of more detailed plans afterward.

Under the initial plans released Tuesday, about 800 acres — a chunk the size of New York's Central Park — will remain open as a wildlife corridor through the developed area, Kitson said.

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Chris Hopper, a cowboy at Babcock Ranch, moves cows through a gate Tuesday morning.

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ABOUT BABCOCK

* Babcock Ranch covers 91,361 acres of pine woods, cypress swamps, marshes and grasslands in Lee and Charlotte counties.

* Its 143 square miles harbor panthers and black bears among other animals.

* The land is considered a vital link in replenishing Southwest Florida's freshwater resources.

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Other green and open space will include water and lakes, passive recreation areas and nature preserves.

“The extent of the green space is truly remarkable,” Kitson said, noting he knows of few similar developments that have left so much space open.

“The way we’re clustering inside the community is also unique,” he said.

The green areas will buffer several small villages or hamlets that surround the town center, where businesses, health care, entertainment and other such activities will be focused.

Villages also are expected to have small shops and restaurants, and about a half-dozen schools are planned.

Kitson said he wants the community to be “self-sustaining” to provide a place where people can shop, work, and take care of daily life without having to get in a car.

Density is highest in the town center, with about 25 units per acres, Kitson said.

Other areas will be in “ranchette” style, with one home on 10 acres. The average density is expected to be about two or three units per acre.

No design guidelines dictating housing or building styles are in place, but he said the community will have such guidelines later.

Kitson said there will be affordable and work force housing in each area, mixed with more expensive housing.

He also said planners are working on ways to ensure affordable housing stays that way even after the original owners sell.

Housing prices are expected to range from low six figures to over \$1 million, he said.

Another special feature, he said, involves plans to restore original water flow ways — disrupted by farming and other activities — to their original path and use marshes to filter urban pollutants from the water. In addition to the open space, Kitson said he may be most excited about the way walking trails, bike paths, horse trails and paths are provided as alternatives to cars.

“You can bike or walk or Segway anywhere you want to go without ever getting on a road,” he said, noting there will be no fences.

In addition to a news conference, Kitson also made his presentation to Charlotte County commissioners.

Board members had few questions or comments.

But Commissioner Adam Cummings said shops, schools, and other services will have to be in place when residents arrive if Kitson is to have a self-sustaining community.

Those amenities usually arrive after the people, Cummings said.

Kitson agreed and said his team is working on ways to subsidize or encourage services to be in place when people arrive.

Cummings also said the wildlife corridor on the development is good, but he worries about wildlife crossing State Road 31 west of the project, which will have to be widened and improved.

Kitson has said he does not expect road improvements to create an additional financial burden on local governments, and wildlife crossings are planned on that road as well.

Several members of the Babcock Preservation Partnership, a group formed to promote the preservation of Babcock Ranch, attended the meeting and expected to speak.

But the agenda was unclear on how that would be handled, and commissioners did not take public comment.

Rae Ann Wessell, of the partnership, said they were disappointed at not being heard.

But listening to Kitson's presentation was educational, she said.

"He's got some great ideas, but Babcock Ranch is not the place for the kind of development he's talking about," she said.

Financial impacts on the counties will be greater than estimated, she said, and the effects of sprawl will be even more wide ranging.

"He's got such a pretty picture," Wessell said, "but this is the wrong project in the wrong place at the wrong time."