

Vickery

Cumming, Georgia

Project Type:
Residential

Case No:
C035019

Year:
2005



SUMMARY

Vickery is a 214-acre (86.6-hectare), mixed-use neighborhood under development in Cumming, Georgia, 30 miles (48.3 kilometers) north of Atlanta. A high-density village center containing a mix of civic and commercial uses as well as townhouses and live/work units is surrounded by small-lot, single-family housing. Planned as an alternative to the low-density development occurring elsewhere in this suburban area, Vickery is designed to provide a diversity of housing choices and community amenities—and thus create a multigenerational and demographically diverse neighborhood.

This is a greenfield project that is being built according to the principles of new urbanism and traditional neighborhood design, with an emphasis on a mix of uses and walkability; the conservation of the site's natural resources; energy conservation and other principles of sustainable development; high-quality building; and traditional-style architecture.

FEATURES

- Sustainable Development
 - Traditional Neighborhood Development
 - Pedestrian-Friendly Design
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LOCATION

Outer Suburban

SITE SIZE

214 acres/86.6 hectares

LAND USES

Planned Community—Small Scale, Single-Family Attached Residential, Single-Family Detached Residential, Mixed Residential, Open Space, Commercial, Retail, Civic Uses, Multifamily Housing, Townhouses, Town Center, Live/Work Space

KEYWORDS/SPECIAL FEATURES

- Sustainable Development
- Traditional Neighborhood Development
- Pedestrian-Friendly Design

PROJECT WEB SITE

www.vickeryvillage.com

DEVELOPER

Hedgewood Properties
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GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Developed by Hedgewood Properties, a homebuilding company owned by a husband and wife, Vickery is a high-density mixed-use neighborhood containing civic and commercial uses as well as townhouses and live/work units surrounded by small-lot, single-family housing. A greenfield project, Vickery was created with new urbanist and traditional neighborhood design principles in mind, with an emphasis on walkability and conservation of energy and natural resources. Designed and built to meet high-performance environmental standards, the community's houses are certified through the EarthCraft House green building program, a voluntary, environmentally friendly construction program sponsored by the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS AND FINANCING

The developer is Hedgewood Properties, owned by Pam Sessions and Don Donnelly, a privately held husband-and-wife homebuilding company that has developed a number of smart growth and green housing projects in the greater Atlanta region—including more than 1,000 housing units in Forsyth County. Sessions and Donnelly acquired a 20-acre (eight-hectare) parcel in the heart of the Vickery site during the early 1980s.

By the mid-1990s, low-density suburban sprawl was beginning to define the area around this site. At the same time, the Sessions-Donnelly family was unhappy with the lack of community in their own life, the dearth of opportunities for their two young children to socialize and venture out on their own, and the need to drive here and there on a daily basis. The notion of a child-friendly, walkable, mixed-use neighborhood-style development grew out of this dissatisfaction—and the recognition that other young families were in the same boat.

Between 1998 and 2000, Sessions and Donnelly assembled land surrounding the 20-acre (eight-hectare) parcel. They purchased 154 acres (62.3 hectares) from two adjoining landowners and entered into a codevelopment agreement on 40 acres (16.2 hectares) with a third owner. The models and inspiration for the development concept that was emerging included their own smart growth, neighborhood-based development projects; European cities and villages; older, walkable neighborhoods in U.S. towns and cities (such as Charleston, South Carolina; Savannah and Madison, Georgia, and the Virginia Highlands neighborhood of Atlanta; and towns on the island of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts); and the new urbanist Seaside community in Florida.

Andrés Duany of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company in Miami, the Seaside planner, was brought in to initiate the planning process with a public charrette, which was held in May 2000. The weeklong charrette, which attracted more than 450 participants, introduced county officials, the project's neighbors, local environmental and civic groups, and the media to the idea of a traditional, higher-density, mixed-use neighborhood in this suburban context—and succeeded in drawing positive attention to the neighborhood conceptual plan.

The county's regulatory framework did not accommodate a mixed-use neighborhood development. Tal Harber, the project manager for Hedgewood Properties, worked with county planners and a local planning consultant to draft a planning and zoning document that is compatible with local regulatory requirements. Vickery was approved as a planned unit development (PUD) enabled by variance within what was an agricultural zone. New urbanist zoning and design guidelines were developed to regulate building design and uses, streetscapes, roads, and landscaping in Vickery's three density zones.

The Vickery project sparked a lively public debate about livability and density in the county. The greatest opposition came from neighbors who had not attended the charrette workshops. The developer was able to allay some of their fears about traffic and the potential burden on schools by referring to the traffic-mitigating effects of the neighborhood's design and combination of uses and by arguing that the housing mix would attract many households without school-age children.

Construction began in October 2002. Vickery is being developed in seven phases; approximately 90 of the planned 564 housing units were completed by the end of 2004. Most of the infrastructure and four of eight planned parks were completed in Phases I and II. Vickery Village, the commercial and civic center of the community, is being developed as part of Phases II and III and will be largely complete by the end of 2005. Buildout is expected to occur by 2011.

Hedgewood financed predevelopment for the first and second phases and formed Vickery Land Company to develop the project. The partner who is the owner/codeveloper of the 40-acre (16.2-hectare) parcel that was not directly acquired shares amenity costs and sells prepared individual parcels directly to Hedgewood Properties. Wachovia Bank provided acquisition, development, and construction loans. Future phases will be financed through a combination of sales proceeds from Phases I and II and loans from Wachovia.

Many project costs were front-loaded. Key predevelopment activities—the charrette, the development of new zoning codes, design and engineering work, and the establishment of infrastructure and town planning standards—required upfront staff time and expertise. The project's land conservation efforts, park development, and extensive landscaping necessitated early funding and, in some cases, entailed additional costs.

SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

The project is located in southern Forsyth County, six miles (9.7 kilometers) west of the town of Cumming, the county seat. Economic growth—especially in the information technology sector—has made Forsyth County one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States in terms of per-capita income. Its farmland, woods, and pastures are being developed at a rapid pace and generally in a sprawl development pattern.

The hilly Vickery site runs north to south between Bentley Creek to the west and Post Road to the east, with the creek and road converging at its southern tip. The terrain runs generally downhill from Post Road toward Bentley Creek and its surrounding wetland. Two small ponds on the property flow into Bentley Creek.

Low-density residential development lies to the north and west of the site. A working stable is located across Post Road to the east, beyond which lies Polo Fields, a well-known golf course community. Vickery Creek Elementary and the county middle school are located just across the creek to the southwest.

COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DESIGN

Residential neighborhoods of descending density radiate outward from a mixed-use, high-density village center in Vickery's traditional neighborhood plan. The village center, which will be located at the southeast corner of the site along Post Road, incorporates a village green with outdoor seating areas; a commercial core that will comprise restaurants, specialty retail stores, a YMCA, and office condominiums; and 133 housing units, including townhouses and live/work units. The placement of the mixed-use area along Post Road has already helped attract other commerce to the area, including a neighborhood-oriented Kroger grocery store that is being built across the street.

North and west of the village center is the project's mid-density residential zone, which accommodates single-family houses on lots measuring one-eighth to one-quarter acre. A clubhouse and events center and a swimming pool and tennis courts are located in the mid-density zone.

On the northern and eastern edges of the site—the edge zone—housing is accommodated on lots of one-sixth to one-half acre.

Narrow streets and generous sidewalks that follow topographic contours create a pedestrian-friendly environment. A network of sidewalks and paths allows children to walk or bike to local schools. Shallow building setbacks—ranging from zero to 12 feet (3.7 meters) from the sidewalk—foster intimate, human-scale streetscapes. Front porches are permitted to extend into setback zones. Pocket parks, including ponds and greenways, and mature trees weave through the neighborhood.

To minimize the presence of cars, 70 percent of the residential lots are served by back-loading alleys that access garages. The plan specifies a hierarchy of street configurations, sidewalks, and parking according to each zone's land uses and density. The street plan creates vistas for pedestrians and gives drivers reasons to proceed slowly. Streets are generally four feet (1.2 meters) narrower than typical suburban streets.

UNIT DESIGN

To encourage diversity in the community, Vickery's developer has designed 12 single-family house plans and six types of housing for the village core. Single-family units range in size from an 1,800-square-foot (167-square-meter) cottage to a 4,800-square-foot (446-square-meter) estate home. The units designed for the village core—lofts, live/work spaces, and townhouses—range in size from 1,600 to 3,000 square feet (148.6 to 278.7 square meters). The guiding concept is an interpretation of traditional architecture—including Greek revival, Craftsman, vernacular, Italianate, French eclectic, and early 20th-century Builder styles—that can be integrated into a coherent neighborhood landscape.

Careful placement of the houses in relation to each other and to the sidewalk is intended to integrate a broad range of housing types into the neighborhood design. Front porches are used to extend household space and create spaces for neighborly interaction.

Block-by-block generational and household diversity is encouraged by including six to ten housing plans within a block. An 1,800-square-foot (167-square-meter) bungalow or a 2,000-square-foot (185.8-square-meter) cottage targeted to single homebuyers who work at home or childless couples may stand next to a 3,400-square-foot (316-square-meter) house targeted to a growing family and a few doors down from a 4,800-square-foot (446-square-meter), "move-up" estate home. Around the block, a 2,500-square-foot (232.3-square-meter), high-end house may attract retired couples or empty nesters. Three blocks away in the village center, a 2,000-square-foot (185.8-square-meter) townhouse may draw single parents with children or single professionals without children.

On the interior, the housing units are designed to meet a range of contemporary homebuyer needs. They offer large kitchens—which function as today's family and entertaining room—and generous closet space. One or two rooms are designed as flexible space that can be adapted to the homebuyer's needs—a home office, second bedroom, playroom, or guest room. Buyers, Hedgewood's research has shown, are willing to trade size for good design and construction and to trade one bedroom for a flexible space.

Foreseeing the possibility that the needs of aging residents of single-family houses may change, the developer aligned large closets on two or three floors and designed them with removable floors so that an elevator could be installed.

Provided with a range of customization options, many homebuyers choose to finish out basements, customize kitchens, and add special features. A number of buyers of single-family houses have elected to build studios or accessory living units on top of their garages. The initial buyers of the live/work units have opted to finish the “work” basements as semi-autonomous living spaces for their grown children or teenagers. Several buyers of townhouses have decided to install a terrace garden on the roof.

Concerned about the environmental impact of their buying choice, a growing number of homebuyers are attracted to environmentally mindful approaches to land development and building. Designed and constructed to meet high-performance environmental standards, the houses at Vickery are certified through the voluntary, environmentally friendly EarthCraft House green building program, sponsored by the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association.

The siting of houses to maximize natural daylight; the use of energy-efficient building systems, including tight building envelopes with double-glazed, low-e windows; and the use of efficient fixtures and appliances save energy. Positive ventilation enhances indoor air quality. Wherever possible, low-impact materials and integrated water-efficient appliances are specified. Hedgewood’s builders train their construction crews and subcontractors to properly design and install framing, insulation, and HVAC systems.

The developer takes a best-practices approach to environmentally sustainable development and construction. Buildings are sited to conserve environmentally sensitive areas. Mature trees are saved wherever possible. Wood chips made from construction waste and removed trees are used for erosion control. A waste management plan that includes the recycling of construction material is prepared for each phase of construction. Leftover gypsum, for example, is ground and returned to the soil to improve its quality.

TARGET MARKET AND RESIDENT PROFILE

Envisioning a diverse, multigenerational neighborhood that would attract households in a broad range of life stages, sizes, and incomes, the developer identified at least four target groups whose needs are not being well met by conventional suburban development:

- families with children—seeking a safe environment in which kids can be creative and independent without having to be driven everywhere;
- empty nesters and retirees—wanting to downsize but not downgrade the quality of their homes and potentially welcoming an opportunity to reduce their reliance on driving;
- nontraditional families and single-parent households—in search of housing products not available in suburban Atlanta; and
- singles—desiring a more urban lifestyle and liking the idea of a multigenerational community.

Sessions and Donnelly based their market assessment on their own experience and that of their peers, and on two decades of working with homebuyers. They bet the success of Vickery on its ability to attract homebuyers who recognize quality and who are willing to trade large lots for lots of community amenities.

During the project’s predevelopment phase, the developer convened focus meetings with two demographic groups: empty nesters over 55 and young people between the ages of eight and 18. Their feedback influenced town planning land use decisions.

A very broad variety of housing types was initially envisioned, ranging from affordable rental units and small apartments priced at just under \$100,000 in the village center to \$1 million estates in the edge zone. However, developing for the lower end of the market was made difficult by the county’s insistence on less density and public resistance to “affordable” housing. The developer eventually decided to focus on high-quality execution rather than pricing as the best method of demonstrating the appeal of the region’s first suburban new urbanist neighborhood to the broader market.

Robust sales suggest that Hedgewood has tapped a broad market of households wanting to live in the suburbs but who are ready for a less car-oriented lifestyle.

At 37 percent, households aged 35 to 44 represent the largest share of Phase I homebuyers. The other age groups represented are 25 to 34, 45 to 54, and 55 to 64 (each constituting 18 percent of homebuyers); and over 65 (9 percent). Eighty-six percent of these homebuyers are couples—53 percent with children, 33 percent without—and 15 percent are singles. Vickery is attracting middle- and upper-middle-income households in a wide range of life stages.

Sessions characterizes Vickery homebuyers as people with a neighborhood spirit and a respect for the qualities of place, as inventive and pioneering people who prefer to “live their values” through their lifestyle choices.

Many moderate- and middle-income households that are not in a high-enough income bracket to purchase Vickery homes are drawn to the neighborhood’s quality, mix of uses, and walkability. But, according to Sessions, the development cannot accommodate many prospects who strongly desire to live in Vickery but lack the economic wherewithal to do so. Had the regulatory process allowed it, Vickery would have included smaller houses and rental units, she says.

MARKETING AND SALES

Interest in the project developed early on. By the time the development's marketing campaign commenced in December 2002, 700 people had signed up on the Vickery Web site. The marketing materials are simple and effective, emphasizing Vickery's people-friendly neighborhood and simpler lifestyle.

At point-of-sale meetings, the sales staff emphasizes the range of community amenities, housing design and customization, building performance, and service. At this point, they also introduce prospects to the benefits of Vickery's certified green building program, which include lower energy costs, healthier indoor air, and reduced maintenance.

The base price for a house at Vickery ranges from \$245,000 to \$800,000, which represents a premium of about 30 percent over median house prices in Forsyth County. Comparable houses in walkable neighborhoods in Atlanta sell for about \$100,000 more. As of this writing, all homebuyers have chosen to customize their houses, adding 15 to 20 percent to the base price.

Among the plans that have proven very popular are a small "Emerson English" cottage and a mid-sized "Fox Glen" unit featuring an open floor plan and flex space. Buyers choose customization options on even the most modestly priced small house, which suggests an unmet demand for personalized, well-designed small residences. A second surprise has been the popularity of the live/work units, all four of which have been bought by families—including two single parents with children—that have customized the basement "work" floor to meet their needs.

EXPERIENCE GAINED

- A segment of suburban residents are drawn to higher-density, walkable mixed-use neighborhoods. They are willing to trade square footage for good design and community amenities. And they welcome the opportunity to live in a multigenerational community that affords them an opportunity to interact with neighbors in a less structured way than is possible in conventional suburban projects.
- Forsyth County's zoning codes did not readily accommodate Vickery's development. The practical application of new urbanist zoning and design codes required inventiveness and negotiation.
- The public planning charrette proved valuable in building understanding of and support for the concept of a mixed-use, relatively dense suburban neighborhood development. Nevertheless, neighborhood resistance based on fears about density and traffic effectively reduced the density and affordability of the housing that could have been developed.
- Hedgewood's environmental stewardship and green building approach to development have received very positive responses from homebuyers.
- The opportunity to adapt flex spaces has proved popular. As of November 2005, all homebuyers have chosen to customize their homes—for an additional 15 to 20 percent cost—to meet their preferences and needs.

PROJECT DATA**LAND USE INFORMATION**

Site area (acres/hectares): 214/86.6
 Dwelling units: 564
 Residential density (units per acre/hectare): 2.6/6.4

LAND USE PLAN

Use	Acres/Hectares	Percentage
Residential	108.2/43.8	51
Mixed use ¹	4.6/1.9	2
Roads/parking	22.0/8.9	10
Open space	75.4/30.5	35
Swim/tennis amenity	3.8/1.5	2

¹Retail, office, and attached residential uses.

RESIDENTIAL UNIT INFORMATION

Unit Type	Size (Square Feet/ Square Meters)	Number of Units (Planned/Sold ¹)	Initial Sales Price
Single-family detached	1,950–4,400/181.0–408.7	431/73	\$245,000–\$1,200,000
Townhouses	1,900–2,775/176.5–257.8	125/14	\$250,000–\$387,000
Live/work units	2,400/223	8/4	\$336,500–\$437,000

¹Units built and under contract as of December 31, 2004.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Age Range	Percentage of All Households
25–34	18
35–44	37
45–54	18
55–64	18
65+	9

Household Type	Percentage of All Households
Singles with children	5
Singles without children	10
Couples with children	53
Couples without children	33

Gender (Single-Person Households)	Percentage of All Single-Person Households
Male	17
Female	83

DEVELOPMENT COST INFORMATION¹

Site Acquisition Cost: \$13,100,000
 Site Improvement Cost: \$15,000,000
 Construction Costs: \$145,000,000
 Direct costs: \$127,000,000
 Fees and general conditions: \$18,000,000
 Soft Costs: \$25,000,000
 Project management: \$1,000,000
 Marketing/sales commissions: \$12,000,000
 Construction interest and fees: \$11,000,000
 Other²: \$1,000,000
 Total Development Cost: \$198,100,000

¹Residential portions of development.

²Includes general and administrative costs, taxes, and homeowners association funding.

DEVELOPMENT SCHEDULE

Site purchased: June 1998–June 2000
Planning started: May 2000
Construction started: October 2002
Sales/leasing started: December 2002
Project completion:
Phase I: February 2003
Phase II: January 2004
Phase III: April 2004 and April 2005
Phase IV: October 2004
Phase V: October 2005
Phase VI (expected): October 2006
Phase VII (expected): October 2007
Buildout (expected): December 2011

DRIVING DIRECTIONS

From Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport: Take a right onto the Interstate 85 entry ramp heading north toward both Atlanta and Interstate 75. Interstate 85 will merge with Interstate 75 and become the James Wendell George Parkway. Follow the highway signs and stay on Interstate 85 for 14 miles (22.5 kilometers), then turn onto GA 400 continuing to head north toward Buckhead/Cumming. After 24 miles (38.6 kilometers), take the McFarland Road exit (exit 12) and head left on McFarland Road; 2.5 miles (four kilometers) later, turn right on Atlanta Highway (Highway 9), then a little more than two miles (3.2 kilometers) later turn left on Post Road (there will be a Publix grocery store on the left). Go two miles (3.2 kilometers) down Post Road. Vickery will be on the left just past the traffic light at Majors Road.

Driving time: One hour in nonpeak traffic.

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This Development Case Study is intended as a resource for subscribers in improving the quality of future projects. Data contained herein were made available by the project's development team and constitute a report on, not an endorsement of, the project by ULI—the Urban Land Institute.

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Located on a greenfield site in Cumming, Georgia, about 30 miles (48.3 kilometers) north of Atlanta, Vickery is a 214-acre (86.6-hectare) high-density mixed-use neighborhood designed according to new urbanist principles.



Courtesy of Hedgewood Properties

In the absence of an existing regulatory framework, Hedgewood properties had to work closely with county planners and a local planning consultant to create this planned unit development (pUD) consisting of townhouses, live/work units, single-family homes, and civic and commercial uses.



Courtesy of Hedgewood Properties

Designed and built to meet high-performance environmental standards, the community's houses are certified through the EarthCraft House green building program, a voluntary, environmentally friendly building program sponsored by the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association. In addition, buildings are sited to conserve environmentally sensitive areas, mature trees were saved where possible, and wood chips made from construction waste and removed trees were used for erosion control.



Features such as shallow building setbacks—ranging from zero to 12 feet (3.7 meters) from the sidewalk—demonstrate the intention of Duany plater-Zyberk & Company to create a land plan that fosters human-scale streetscapes.



Vickery site plan.