



Changing Housing Market

## When Baylor Students Get the Jump on Waco Seniors

by Zach Carter

What happens when a quick change in market conditions – even for an experienced nonprofit developer – turns a planned 45-unit subdivision for seniors into a housing destination of choice for area college students?

“It’s so unlike Waco to have this kind of mini-boom,” said Roy Nash, executive director of NeighborWorks® Waco, which started planning the subdivision four years ago. “We just realized with what’s happening in the neighborhood, the thought that it would be purely a senior community probably is not going to happen.”

Instead, for example, the first home in the Country Place subdivision was purchased for a Baylor University student by her grandparents, and the college market is definitely where the most interest for

the subdivision has been generated.

But four years ago, everything was different. Four years ago, the future home of the Country Place subdivision was just a grassy field that once had been a road construction debris site. Surrounded by a few frame houses with sprawling several-acre yards and a century-old cemetery, it was a picture of quiet isolation.

Only a few miles from downtown Waco, the spot caught the eye of NeighborWorks® Waco as an ideal dwelling location for seniors looking to enjoy the safety and convenience of urban proximity, while embracing the tranquility of a semi-rural neighborhood.

“The organization had been looking into doing a project like this for some time,” said Chris Gutierrez,

NeighborWorks® Waco board member. “When the property became available and the price was right – and with the success of other subdivision projects taken on by the organization – the board felt this would be a great opportunity.”

### *The Original Plan*

After all, with Waco’s growing population of seniors and limited availability of quality, affordable housing stock, so the thinking went, a planned unit development of energy-efficient, low-maintenance, garden homes seemed more than appropriate.

So, with a promised \$150,000 in infrastructure development assistance from the city of Waco, development began in Country Place. It took some time to clear the initial hurdles of testing for hazardous materials and designing and tweaking the neighborhood master plan and plans for individual homes, but little by little, the subdivision began to take shape.

In fact, the extra time required for planning Country Place is an indicator of the project’s uniqueness.

“We spent quite a bit of time just on the covenants and restrictions, which are about four or five times as long as these documents usually are,” said Nash. “We really wanted to make sure that the neighborhood retained the kind of look and atmosphere that we were going for, that it stayed nice for the residents.

“For instance, homeowners’ association membership is mandatory for all homebuyers in the subdivision. The \$50 dues pay for an exterior maintenance service that cares for each home’s front lawn, as well as a centrally located common area with a small park, a gazebo for holding picnics or other gatherings, and a walking trail.”

Not until construction was well under way, did it become evident that NeighborWorks® Waco was not the only developer interested in the uniquely situated area.

### *The Surprise*

Only a few blocks from Baylor, the land around Country Place experienced a rapid and unprecedented influx of student housing construction. More than 250 units of college-oriented apartments, duplexes, and single-family houses have been built around the

Country Place subdivision in the past three years, according to the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, and at least 112 more units are in development.

“It was so unexpected,” said Nash, “this phenomenon of all the duplexes coming in and surrounding us so quickly.”

As NeighborWorks® Waco prepared for the Grand Opening of Country Place in April, it was confronting the challenge of attracting seniors to an area with a very different – and much younger – character than just four years earlier, when the project began.

In addition to student inquiries, NeighborWorks® Waco also has seen interest from Baylor faculty. It expects that the subdivision’s restrictions – mandating that homes be occupied by an owner or immediate family member, for instance, and limiting street parking – as well as the character of the homes – compact floor plans and a small side courtyard rather than a back yard – will prevent the neighborhood from being dominated by students’ lifestyles.

In the end, NeighborWorks® Waco faces the challenge of catering to a more heterogeneous group of buyers than originally anticipated, while not losing sight of the original vision of a quiet, low-maintenance garden home community.

Responding to this challenge will provide valuable lessons for organizations that take on such projects in the future.

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328 Wagon Wheel, with three bedrooms and two baths, was one of the first three homes built in Country Place.