

## HOME PRICE SURVEY



Craig H. Hartley photos

Jorge Sesin, with his newly adopted rescue dog Bella, talks with his neighbor Vince Cangolosi in Johnson Development's Cross Creek Ranch in Fulshear. Michelle Braud and her family threw a block party for their new neighbors.

# Master-planned communities hold allure for many

By Erin Mulvaney

Master-planned communities continue to attract homebuyers to the edges of the region where order, conformity and suburban amenities provide an alternative to the untamed city center.

The communities continue to be a major part of Houston's housing market, even now as demand outpaces supply. National reports and homes sales last year show that the Houston region remains one of the top places in the country to build the carefully laid-out communities, representing about 30 percent of new-home sales in the region.

Michelle and Parrish Braud moved with their boys, Taylor and Connor, from Florida last year to Fulshear's Cross Creek Ranch. The Houston-based Johnson Development Corp.'s master-planned community saw 509 home sales last year, a 69 percent increase from 2012, according to John Burns Real Estate Consulting data.

### From the beginning

The family was attracted to the master-planned community in part because strict homeowner rules maintain standards by controlling what can be built. These types of communities are planned from inception, incorporating not just residential but also retail, commercial and other amenities built on large

Houston area has major share of biggest such neighborhoods

tracts of undeveloped land. Even the color schemes homeowners may choose are restricted.

"We really like the fact that it's laid out," Michelle Braud said. "We want to be in one central location, and everything is kind of like us. It stays nice and neat and clean and kept up."

She said the family was also attracted to the school district and the available amenities, like a fitness center and pool. But the fact that the neighborhood was pre-planned was one of the main draws, she said.

"You don't want to be the biggest house on the block or the smallest house on the block," Braud said. "The conformity helps values. You don't want to buy a \$500,000 house and have someone put up a trailer or a high-rise next to you."

### Area prominent on list

Last year, Metrostudy, which conducts industry analyses, showed that eight of the country's 20 biggest master-planned communities in 2013 are in the Houston area, six in Fort Bend County alone. No other region had more neighborhoods on the list.

Another annual report showed Houston with nine of the 20 top-selling

neighborhoods for 2013. RCLCO, which compiled that annual ranking based on number of sales by each community, said 30 percent of all new-home sales in the Houston area are in master-planned communities, and that number has been growing.

Most of the local communities that made this year's RCLCO list are far-flung and fast-growing. Fulshear, more than 30 miles from downtown Houston, is represented twice, with No. 12 Cross Creek Ranch and No. 20 Firethorne. City officials say the town's population has swelled to an estimated 5,000, from 400 just a decade ago.

### 'A safe haven'

Doug Goff, chief operating officer of Johnson Development, said lax regulation from local government makes the Houston region an attractive place to build.

"It's been a place where today, as opposed to anywhere else, master-planned-community developers can feel it's a safe haven," Goff said. "In times of difficult economic conditions, buyers gravitate toward a flight to quality."

Goff said with the supply of land at an all-time low, developers of master-planned communities are accelerating programs to bring as many to the market as possible.

### New communities

The new communities include Johnson's 2,700 planned homes on 1,300 acres at the intersection of Grand Parkway and West Airport Boulevard. Earlier this year, a developer announced plans to expand Johnson's Sienna Plantation. Luxury home builder Toll Brothers and New York-based private equity firm GTIS Partners acquired 3,700 acres just south of Sienna Plantation to build another 6,500 homes over the next 15 to 20 years.

Also under development are a 1,000-acre community in Manvel, from Dallas-based Hillwood, and a 993-acre project just south of Kingwood, from Charlotte, N.C.-based Crescent Communities.

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Parrish Braud and Michelle Braud and children Connor and Taylor find Cross Creek Ranch to their liking. "It stays nice and neat and clean and kept up," Michelle Braud says.