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Good feelings

BY: MARK GORDON | MANAGING EDITOR

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Marty Black oversees a master-planned community being built on Thomas Ranch in North Port, in south Sarasota County. File Photo

The next 12 months will be busy for Marty Black.

The longtime developer leads an ambitious project in south Sarasota County, to turn Thomas Ranch, a 9,650-acre property into a successful live, work and play development. Master-planned communities like that are sprinkled statewide. The list includes FishHawk Ranch in Hillsborough County, Lakewood Ranch in

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east Manatee County and the forthcoming Babcock Ranch in Charlotte and Lee counties.

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Downtown revival

Black, general manager of the project owned by Canada-based Mattamy Homes, has already been at it since midway through 2014. In May that year Mattamy and some minority partners bought the property from Thomas Enterprises for \$86.25 million. The deal for the land, in the city of North Port, was the largest single land residential purchase in acres in the country in 2014. It was also the largest U.S. purchase ever for Mattamy Homes.

Pre-construction work for several hundred homes in three separate communities, including land clearing, has already begun. And in early December, the developers announced a significant advancement in the project: a joint venture with Sembler Co., a St. Petersburg-based developer known for multiple successful commercial centers, including many with Publix, to build the Marketplace at Coastamar in West Villages. It's the master-planned community's first commercial development, planned at up to 80,000 square feet, and it includes a large grocery store, Black says.

Announcement of the commercial project, named for the community's coastal vibe and that it's a few minutes from beaches, was well received. "We have people just clamoring for retail," Black says. "It's been refreshing to see that kind of support."

Coastamar, which also has restaurants and entertainment venues, is the first project of what could be up to 3 million square feet of commercial space in the community. "This is only a small part of our overall vision," says Black.

Planning and permitting is underway for the project, on the west side of U.S. 41, just north of State College of Florida-Venice. Black hopes construction could begin toward the end of 2016, and the center could be open by late 2017. The developers partnered with Sembler after meeting with more than a dozen potential firms. "Sembler is the ideal partner for us," Black says. "We like their vision and energy and the team approach they take."

The residential side, meanwhile, includes a wide range of projects. Gran Paradiso, from homebuilder Lennar, and Island Walk, from Pulte, already have homes, which predate the Mattamy-run project. The next residential projects, scheduled to break ground in 2016, are The Preserve at The West Villages and the Renaissance at The West Villages.

A unit of Mattamy Homes will be among the homebuilders in the new communities, including about 110 homes in The Preserve, says a West Villages spokeswoman. Mattamy will also sell lots to other builders.

Past homes and commercial space, plans for the project include walking/biking-friendly paths and streets; an urgent care facility and medical offices; dog parks; up to 50 acres for a school; and at least 70 acres preserved for conservation. The ranch has a history that dates back to the 1930s, and over the last 80 years it has been used for sod, watermelon, citrus, hay and grazing, among other agriculture activities.

One constant in the process so far, says Black, is neighbors in surrounding communities have, for the most part, embraced the project — something that doesn't always happen with large-scale development. "That support," says Black, "will hopefully never go away."

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