
Willowsford Bridges Gap Between Rural, Urban Living

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by Samantha Bartram

Willowsford Farm is a residential development looking to modern, yet timeless, trends for its inspirations. Characteristics like bountiful farmland, wide, open spaces and craftsman-level construction that once typified small agrarian towns are now being put to use on more than 4,000 acres of rolling Virginia countryside at one of RPL, LLC's newest ventures.

Bisected by Rt. 50, the Aldie-area development offers the best of rural living—like access to fresh, farm-to-table produce and wide swaths of recreational terrain—coupled with slick features expected by today's discerning buyer. Both the Sycamore Club House and The Lodge at Willow Lake will feature high-class amenities like large community pools, a kitchen suitable for demonstrations or social gatherings, a fitness center, access to a stocked lake for canoeing and fishing and more to residents of its four distinct communities—The Grange, The Grant, The Greens and The Grove. Buyers can choose home styles from four different builders, each offering a wide array of floor plans and materials.

It's likely Willowsford Farm has hit on something big with this combination, as interest in the development continues to grow.

The Concept

Surrounding Willowsford's four neighborhoods are pockets of farmland and some 2,200 acres of designated open space under the stewardship of the Willowsford Conservancy. That area is in permanent conservation, meaning it can never be developed and will instead be preserved through a variety of uses, including an extensive trail network, agricultural production and preservation of existing streambeds, forests, meadows and other natural features.

Although only six homes—in The Grange and The Grove—are occupied so far, construction in all sections of Willowsford is ongoing. “We wanted to create a community out of [Willowsford],” Brian Cullen, regional president at RPL, said.

“We decided we wanted to develop it like a community and brand all the villages under one name, Willowsford. Then the question was, ‘what are people looking for? What makes this different?’”

Turns out people from a wide demographic spectrum are looking for pretty much the same thing. “The traffic is much broader than we thought,” Cullen said.

“Buyers who are 30-50 years old, the buyer moving up from a townhouse or another single family home...folks not looking to live in an age-restricted community but who love the concept we’re talking about. Maybe they raised kids in Ashburn Farm or Ashburn Village and it was great, but they like the idea of a 2,000-acre backyard. They like the farming aspect of it.”

Cullen said RPL could have pressed for a more dense development, but instead decided offering customers choice in several aspects of their home-buying experience was more valuable than just building more homes. “We decided to create different sized products throughout the community. So we could have different price points of homes, different lot sizes—lots that are 8,000 square feet on the small side to more than 2 acres on the large side—there’s a big spectrum,” he said.

Once the housing development scheme was settled upon, RPL looked at what it had left. “We ended up with roughly 2,200 acres of open space, not counting backyards or entry features. We’re talking about acreage to create big, open space,” Cullen said. His men took care to preserve as much of the original tree stand in Willowsford as possible, treating the growth as an asset rather than something to be removed to make way for houses.

Still other spots peppered throughout Willowsford have been designated for farmland. This, too, was treated as a benefit to the development and something that could be capitalized upon. “We had a lot of farm fields...we decided to create a farm to generate food production that the residents could participate in,” Cullen said.

The Farm

That asset truly takes hold of the recent farm-to-table, back-to-nature movement that’s been sweeping the nation. Michael Snow heads up operations at Willowsford’s farm—this season, he’s got about two-and-a-half acres in production. “Right now I’m growing pretty much any kind of vegetable, maybe about 50 different varieties,” Snow said. Indeed, in one field practically as far as the eye can see stretches rows of parsley, lettuces, fennel, beets and other robust-looking vegetables.

Over time, Snow will expand his current team of four to enough people to maintain up to 250 acres of farmland in Willowsford, either growing produce or supporting small herds of animals. “There’s a lot of land and it’s pretty spread out, so it’s a logistical challenge but such a great opportunity.” Animal husbandry is a long way off for Snow and his team at this point, but, “as we expand, we will take on some animals,” he said.

Hailing from an urban background in Cleveland, OH, Snow “got the farming bug” and has since worked on agricultural projects and managed farms and training programs in nearby Maryland. He learned through that work the importance of growing organically, and brought that practice to Willowsford, although the farm is not certified organic by the USDA. “We grow organically but we’re not certified organic,” Snow said, explaining the distinction offers an opportunity for greater communication with Willowsford residents. He encouraged anyone to ask as many questions as possible about his farming systems, willingly breaking down the rationale behind his methods. “We don’t use synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. We use the same cultivation

practices an organic farm would do, and we live within the spirit of the organic movement,” Snow said.

“Our vision is we want to serve the community with the farm—we want to grow food for the people who live here...clean, safe, fresh, local, healthy food.”

That produce is destined for the tables of Willowsford residents, or for the demonstration kitchen headed up by Culinary Director Bonnie Moore. There, students can learn how to best utilize Snow’s harvest through a series of ongoing cooking classes.

Living Space

Homebuyers can choose from styles from four popular builders in the area: Beazer, Integrity, K. Hovnanian and Van Metre homes. Each offer a variety of floor plans and distinct materials; so there are lots of designs to appeal to any taste.

Willowsford has a “non-monotony” rule, meaning it must employ different builders who will construct different houses, and no two similar styles may sit next to one another. The result is a refreshing departure from the typical town center or townhome development, where houses tend to blend together.

Price points begin in the low \$500,000s, like Integrity Homes’ cute Georgian, folk Victorian and Federal elevations, as well as a “bungalow arts and crafts” style. Beazer, K. Hovnanian and Van Metre styles are larger in both square footage and price, and also feature several styles and construction materials from which to choose.

These family dwellings are complimented by the aforementioned Sycamore House and Lodge, which when fully complete will be bursting with amenities. At the moment, the community pool at Sycamore House is under construction—it’s planned to open for Memorial Day weekend. Across the development, another pool at the Lodge will soon be underway—its “infinity” style will look out over Willowsford’s lake and boat house, where families may gather for boating, fishing, grilling out or building a campfire.

The Great Outdoors

Sure, fun times can be spent at the well-appointed community centers, but there’s also some 45 miles of nature trails featured at Willowsford. Most are gravel, some are paved, but all wind through classic Virginia naturescapes with an abundance of flora and fauna to enjoy. “It really does feel like you’re somewhere else [on the trails],” Cullen said. “We’re not suburbia, but we’re on the edge of it...here you feel like you’re somewhere else.”

Residents and their guests are invited to hike, bike, run or walk the trails. They can also be used as a guide to one of two existing dog parks, where four-legged Willowsfordians are allowed their freedom.

They say it's a buyer's market, and although the price tag to buy at Willowsford isn't small, it's perhaps a more worthy investment than many real estate ventures in recent memory. RPL and its business partners seem to have a firm finger on the pulse of both societal trends and the rebounding housing market, but Cullen emphasized a more important aspect of making Willowsford a great community: listening to his customers.

“We are really listening to the traffic at the greeting center. We're getting information from everyone who comes in there and listening to what people say...we will eventually have 2,200 [homeowners]—we need to listen to what customers want,” he said.