



Groundwork complete on The Preserve at Botany Bay

Upscale development on West End of St. Thomas will include homes, a hotel, a restaurant and a spa

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The Preserve at Botany Bay is a 397-acre luxury development that will cost more than \$200 million.
Daily News Photos by SEAN McCOY

ST. THOMAS - The first stage of building preparation at Botany Bay has been completed, laying the groundwork for upscale development to begin shortly on St. Thomas' West End.

A blue-bit stone wall, wrought-iron fence, gatehouse with around-the-clock security and elegant signage now tell visitors they have arrived at the 397-acre property being called The Preserve at Botany Bay.

Nearby, a 1,000-square-foot sales gallery displaying glossy photographs and shell and stone artifacts attracts prospective buyers. And down the hillside, extensive paving of approximately 16-foot-wide concrete roads and laying of main electricity, telephone, water and sewer lines, all part of phase one, recently were finished.

The project, which will cost more than \$200 million, is to include individual vacation homes, time-shares or fractional real estate, a boutique hotel and amenities including a high-end restaurant and spa.

The developer, Colorado-based Timbers Resorts, recently satisfied the prerequisites for the major Coastal Zone Management permit it holds with its joint venture partners, chief executive officer David Burden said. The company expects to receive the permit soon. "We spent the past year and a half really designing the master plan and going through the CZM process," Burden said. "That was our focus, to plan the property properly, rather than running out and building everything." The developer expects to return to CZM for a permit modification later this year for some design aspects that have been tweaked, project director Don Parris said.

Sales and marketing

Sales of land for individual homesites within the project already have been brisk, with one 14-acre parcel going for \$3.75 million, Burden said.

On the north side of the property, 21 of 22 estate lots have been purchased, and three of the 19 lots recently put up for sale on the south side are taken, ownership representative Melanie Taylor said.

Reservations are being taken for 30 stand-alone hilltop villas or cottages for which the land is not yet being sold outright, she said, and 11 buyers have put in \$25,000 deposits on them.

Three homesite owners, who must apply for minor CZM permits, plan to start building in January, Taylor said.

Timbers Resorts is trying to entice travelers who in the past might have chosen St. John or St. Barth's, Burden said.

"Our marketing has been to the people who go to the quaint, more intimate islands. We say, 'Give us an hour.' Once someone gets to the property, they're as surprised as we were," he said. "We weren't surprised that there are beautiful places on St. Thomas, but we just couldn't believe how jewel-like it is."

Timbers, which also has golf, ski and beach resort properties in Mexico, Tuscany, Arizona and Colorado, began by tapping into its own mailing list for potential buyers. The company also plans to advertise in publications like Conde Nast Traveler, Departures, Travel + Leisure, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, Burden said.

The addition of the Yacht Haven Grande luxury yacht marina on St. Thomas last winter has added to the island's cache and helped Timbers appeal to ultra-wealthy travelers, he said. Timbers keeps an office at the marina.

Design changes

Timbers Resorts continues to make adjustments in its designs and promotions in order to better appeal to its target market, Parris said.

For instance, the developer last received permission in its CZM permit for 40 hilltop villas to be spread among six large buildings. "As we continued to evaluate that, we didn't like it," Parris said. "It was too much mass. We wanted something softer."

The company's working plans shifted to housing 40 units in 20 duplex buildings, but its directors wanted to maximize buyers' views and privacy, Parris said. Now, Timbers plans 30 stand-alone villas or cottages, each including three bedrooms within roughly 2,500 square feet of indoor space - a change that must be approved by the St. Thomas CZM Committee.

Currently, the developer holds a CZM permit for an 84-room hotel. Negotiations with potential high-end hotel operators continue, Burden said, but the company is leaning toward operating the hotel itself. The company hopes to break ground on it by next April, he said, and construction should take 18 months.

Although the specifications for the hotel may be altered, "It won't be drastically larger or drastically smaller," Parris said.

Project concessions

The developer purchased slightly less than 370 acres at Botany Bay in 2000 for \$11 million. Late last year, the company bought another 30 adjacent acres to the south from the V.I. Housing Finance Authority, Burden said. That acreage is proposed to be subdivided into an additional seven home lots.

Over the years, plans for the lush Botany Bay land have changed several times.

The project, which was legally challenged by a Virgin Islands environmental group and fiercely

opposed by many St. Thomas residents, called for varying numbers of villas, timeshare units, estate lots and hotel rooms at different points. As the drawn-out permitting process began to wind down last year, CZM applied a number of special conditions to the company's permit, including requiring road maintenance, special lighting for sea turtles and public beach access.



A road at the lower end of The Preserve at Botany Bay.

Although the security gate is manned around the clock, Parris said the public still has access to pristine Sandy Bay, west of Botany Bay on the property, on foot. The walk down to the shore, which now can be taken on a sidewalk, is more than 1 mile. Later in the development process, public parking spaces will be added closer to the coastline.

Timbers Resorts already has taken steps such as rerouting planned roads when archaeological ruins were found, Burden said, and it plans to apply strict protective controls as construction continues over the next four years.

"We're not perfect. We have to look to our investors and get a good return, but at the same time, we want something we're going to be very proud of," he said. "We can respect and keep it as low-impact as possible, and at the same time make it economically viable."

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