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PHYSICAL CULTURE

From Kitchen to the Wild in 30 Seconds

By BRADLEY MELEKIAN

WHEN Heath Adcock, a trail runner, and his wife moved to the Denver area a few years ago, he told real estate agents that he wasn't content to be just within driving distance of the wilderness. He wanted to put on his shoes and be darting under a cathedral of trees in no time.

"For me, it's important to be able to go out of my garage and be on a trail in a minute's time," Mr. Adcock, 33, said.

To get nature in their backyard, the couple settled in Highlands Ranch, a 22,000-acre planned community in Douglas County (16 miles south of Denver) with nearly 70 miles of trails through scrub pine and chaparral. "Some people may say running's running," Mr. Adcock said. But "you're getting away from all the hustle and bustle of the streets; it's like a sanctuary."

Access to dirt trails — not just bicycle lanes or sidewalks — is a priority for so many runners like Mr. Adcock that housing developers are increasingly carving miles of paths through the wild to attract them. The trend is most pronounced in areas with acres of open land and sprawling new planned communities. But some crowded towns are finding ways to incorporate trails, hoping to lure the booming number of off-road runners and other trail users.

"For years, developers had been developing golf courses as though it were the only way to sell houses," said Ed McMahon, the senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, a development research group in Washington. "But the vast majority of buyers do not play golf."

"Now we're seeing an explosion of trail systems in new communities," Mr. McMahon said, "because developers are starting to catch on to what prospective homebuyers want."

Trails are the No. 1 amenity potential homeowners cite when asked what they would like to see in a new community, ahead of public parks and outdoor pools, according to the National Association of Home Builders. Trails were cited by 57 percent of prospective buyers in a 2004 survey by the association. "All of the evidence we have suggests that demand for trails is increasing," said Gopal Ahluwalia, the vice president for research at the builders' group.

Running on trails — whether semi-manicured paths of crushed stone built by developers, or forest paths cleared by deer — appeals to runners because of the variety of scenery, greater solitude and softer terrain underfoot.

Off-road running is exploding in popularity because nature lovers have less time to get out into the wild. There are 40 million trail runners nationwide as of 2005, according to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, up 22.1 percent from 1998. In the same period the popularity of other wilderness activities that are more time-consuming declined: backpacking was down 22.5 percent; mountain biking dropped 6.9 percent.

Trail-running clubs, led by the All American Trail Running Association, are finding that developers often spearhead the creation of trail networks.

“The opposition we face is from those developers who would rather put in condominiums or housing developments, and buy up the open space that exists,” said Nancy Hobbs, the executive director of the running association. “But, on the other side of the coin, developers are helpful because they might have a great planned community, and they’ll develop the trail system for you.”

Build trails and homeowners will come — that’s the hope of John Robbins, a land developer who is working on three projects that will have extensive trails. “People have had their fill of golf course communities and the same old same old,” said Mr. Robbins, the president of Greathorn Properties, which is in Concord, N.C. In one new community, the Woodlands in Davidson, N.C., he said, “We’re putting in as much or more trail length as we are roads.”

Homes at Woodlands, most priced at \$350,000 to \$1 million, will not go on sale until December, but Mr. Robbins said his company has already received dozens of calls from people interested in hearing more about the community’s heavily-wooded crushed-stone trails.

Developers of Bartram Trail, a planned community in Evans, Ga., hope constructing a few miles of dirt paths, leaving ample open spaces, will prove attractive to buyers of lots priced from \$65,000 to \$100,000. “Even though we’re not developing to our maximum, we’re still increasing our lot values because we can tell a buyer that the property behind their house will never be developed,” said Jason Whinghter, a manager at Blanchard and Calhoun, which is developing Bartram Trail.

Designer trails can be as expensive to build as tennis courts and parks. “Trails aren’t cheap,” said Mr. Robbins of Greathorn Properties. “You’re talking about going in and very carefully developing a level pathway, and at the entrances they have to be well lit and manicured.”

Still, homeowners are willing to pay to have them nearby. A decade ago, when Prairie Crossing, one of the first planned communities to integrate wilderness paths into its design, was opened in Grayslake, Ill., prospective buyers thought its 10 miles of trails were worth added expense to build and maintain them.

They still do, said George A. Ranney Jr. of the Prairie Holding Corporation, which designed Prairie Crossing. “If you look at our house prices on a square-foot basis, they are about 30 percent higher than other homes in our area,” he said. “About 15 percent of that comes from the fact that the homes themselves are very energy efficient. But the other 15 percent relates to trail systems, lakes and open spaces.”

Having a crushed-stone trail 20 yards from the backdoor sold Jim Cubit, 52, and his wife, Laurie, also 52, on Prairie Crossing. “When we were looking at this house to buy, I remember looking out the back window

and I saw a guy run by,” said Mr. Cubit, the director of library and information technology at Lake Forest College. “I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, look at this, there’s a trail right out what would be my backyard.’ ”

Before developers got into the act, trail runners mostly used paths built by state and local governments. In the last two decades, towns have worked with Rails to Trails Conservancy, a national organization, to convert more than 13,000 miles of idle railroad right-of-ways into pathways.

“In communities that are built out, the municipalities have fewer choices about where to look for open space preservation and subsequently for trail development,” said Peter Bronski, the manager of sustainable communities for Audubon International. “A number of them have been successful in receiving Rails to Trails grants, and that’s been a really great trend.”

Before the town of Henrietta, N.Y., created a scenic pathway, its most marked features were its big box stores and sprawling parking lots. But after it won a Rails to Trails grant in 2004, a 15-mile-long rail corridor called the Lehigh Valley Trail became a prominent attraction for residents and potential homeowners.

“It has really become the major community amenity,” Mr. Bronski said. “They’ve done their efforts to acquire and preserve green space corridors along either side, so although you may be running through a residential neighborhood, when you’re on the trail, you very much have the feel of being in a natural area, or being in a forest.”

Runners who don’t live near paths waste time and gas commuting to one. “It’s really hard to justify getting in your car and driving 25 to 35 minutes to go run on a trail, when you can just go outside your front door and run on the road,” said Jeri Frederiksen, 41, of East Amherst, N.Y., a mother who prefers a jaunt in the woods but often finds herself pavement-bound out of necessity.

For many overscheduled nature lovers, running can be a quick dose of greenery. “We just really don’t have time anymore,” said John Bradley, an editor of Outside magazine in Santa Fe, N.M. “So instead of doing the 48-hour camping trip, you can go spend 45 minutes running on the trails. What I think it really speaks to is that we still do have this incredible bond with the outdoors,” but “because of modern schedules, we’ve just changed the way we interact.”

For Scott Dunlap, who works for a start-up technology company, trail-running on narrow mountain footpaths near his Bay Area home in Woodside, Calif., is like taking a mini-holiday. As a backpacker he used to spend days heading as deep into the wild as possible for the sense of isolation. Now he finds solitude in trail-running. “Miles into the wilderness you can get that same sensation, but you just get it within a day and come right back,” he said.

On the other hand, dashing through the woods is no way to enjoy the stillness and beauty of the outdoors, some critics say. “When nature becomes just a backdrop for exercise, we lose a great deal in our experience of it,” said Richard Louv, the author of “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder.”

Regardless how deep into the wild a runner trudges, for many hitting dirt is the key to running at all. “If we had to get up every morning and battle on the streets, I just don’t think running would be as appealing,” Mr. Cubit said. “At least this way, the only thing you’re dodging is a bike. Maybe, where we live, a horse.”

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