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NBC: Making the Best of 2020 Thanksgiving

Spending more time at home has people re-evaluating their space - and looking for more.

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The first time Sasha and Ashton Hulscher visited the growing Arden development on Southern Boulevard west of Wellington, it was like a dream.

“It had everything we wanted,” Sasha Hulscher said.

But the couple had no intention of buying.

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That changed about a year later during the coronavirus pandemic. At home with their children, the couple began looking at their surroundings — and realized they did want to move to the “agrihood,” which combines a suburban feel with wide open spaces and a working farm.

Now, like so many others in Palm Beach County, the Hulschurs have a new house under construction with builder Kenco in Arden, part of a larger trend during the pandemic as people finding themselves spending more time at home and re-evaluate their space.



Arden alone has seen a 41 percent increase in sales since the beginning of the pandemic, according to its developer, Freehold Communities.

Other new home communities in Palm Beach County are seeing similar increases, with builders including Minto and Pulte charting jumps, especially since the beginning of summer.

‘Stuck at home’

People spent more time at home since the beginning of the pandemic, especially from mid-March to about June, when many businesses were closed.

During that time, people looked around their spaces at what they had — and what they didn’t, Freehold Communities marketing director Susan Moguel said.

“When you’ve been stuck at home for so long ... you feel very claustrophobic,” she said.

More: [Uptown Boca welcomes REI, apartment dwellers as mixed-use project opens despite pandemic](#)

That has driven many from apartments, condominiums and more congested areas to Arden, built on a former sod farm near 20-Mile Bend with 15 miles of trails, two large lakes and a farm that provides residents with fresh produce, she said.

“People who come out to Arden, they’re coming because they’re looking for wide-open spaces,” Moguel said, adding, “We’ve been selling homes really at a record pace.”

In Westlake, Palm Beach County’s newest city, developer Minto also is doing business at a record clip, Minto Communities USA president Mike Belmont said.



“We’ve had just an outstanding year,” he said.

While sales slumped in March and April, they have continued to rise since May, Belmont said.

From January to late October, Minto sold 406 homes in Westlake — about a 250 percent increase over the same period the year before, when Minto sold 164 homes, he said.

Minto also has sold some of its land in Westlake to other builders: Label & Co., which opened for sales in February and sold 159 homes, and Kolter Homes, which opened more recently and already has sold about 30 homes, Belmont said.

The demand is so high that when new lots are available, he said people line up outside Minto’s sales office in Westlake, which rose on the former Callery-Judge citrus grove after years of debate over growth in and around The Acreage.

“There is a tremendous amount of demand,” Belmont said, adding that so far Minto has been able to keep up with the pace, in part by moving up some development that hadn’t been planned to begin until 2021.

More: [Pandemic finds Antique Row in West Palm Beach adapting to changing tastes, buying habits](#)

More than 60% of Minto’s Westlake sales over the summer were buyers moving from rental homes or apartments, he said.

“COVID-19 has kind of been the impetus to get people to move, for various reasons,” he said. “I think the idea of having your own home and your own backyard is pretty important.”

The need for space and flexibility inside and outside of a home is a major trend at The Fields, a Pulte Group-developed neighborhood on Lake Worth Road west of Florida’s Turnpike, Pulte vice president of sales Bridjette Shelfo said.

Pulte sold 125 homes at The Fields through the end of October, she said, with a high demand for townhomes.

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“People are definitely gravitating toward the home that meets their needs,” Shelfo said.

Buyers coming to The Fields are re-evaluating what they want from their homes, she said.

“And they’re seeing more ability to customize the home and see the way they want to live ... with multipurposing spaces,” Shelfo said.

The Hulschers had a lot of room to move at their last house in Royal Palm Beach, but were looking for something that didn't have the many issues that come along with aging homes.



“It’s the conveniences, like impact windows,” Ashton Hulscher said. “We’re both in our mid-40s, and that has an appeal.”

Realtor **Bonnie Heatzig**, known as “The Luxury Real Estate Authority,” said buyers are looking for more flexibility in their homes.

“A lot of people now are working from home,” she said. “They also want homes that have a home gym. ... They really want to live more in their space.”

Done with city life

While some new home buyers live in Palm Beach County, builders and Realtors say some also are coming from elsewhere.

Since the beginning of the summer, more people are coming from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut — even California, they said.

“It’s really incredible,” **Heatzig** said. She works primarily in southern Palm Beach County and said that just in one day last week, she met three buyers from California.

Joey Hartman, general manager of sales with Pulte Group, said people are coming from all over the country to buy in South Florida.

More: Smaller, brighter Winn-Dixie opens west of Boynton Beach, part of chain's effort to revive brand

“We’re seeing a lot of push from those areas,” Hartman said of the Northeast and California. “I would say in the last three months or so, we’ve seen a big increase there.”

Heatzig agreed.

“We’re getting people from all over,” she said. And while some buyers say they’re choosing South Florida over higher-tax states, others say the pandemic has left them wanting more space.

“They are going bigger,” **Heatzig** said.

In Westlake, Minto is seeing about a quarter of recent buyers coming from Broward County, Belmont said.

Facing some challenges

As the demand for new homes continues to rise, builders have faced some challenges.

The pandemic has affected the supply chain, particularly for appliances, Belmont said.

Many common appliance parts are made in Mexico and China, two countries hit hard by COVID-19.

“So the demand for that’s huge,” Belmont said.

Demand has driven up prices for other home-building supplies, including lumber and windows, he said.

Builders said they are doing their best to grapple with any price increases or shortages.

Pulte's Shelfo said they are experiencing it “just as much as any other large builder.”

“I think we’re navigating the shortage the best that we can,” she said, adding that Pulte is doing its best to leverage trade relationships to get the best possible result for its buyers.

The company also is working to “overcommunicate” with buyers about delays, Shelfo said.

Selling and buying

Before the Hulschers move with their two sons and two large dogs to their new home in Arden, they first had to sell their house in the Madison Green neighborhood of Royal Palm Beach.

The couple put their home on the market on a Friday. By Sunday, they had multiple offers, Sasha Hulscher said.

“The reality is, we sold this house so easy,” said Sasha Hulscher. “It’s quite extraordinary.”

It really is a seller’s market, **Heatzig** said. Interest rates are “incredibly low,” she said.

That makes home-buying an even more competitive process for buyers, **Heatzig** said.

“Definitely be prepared” to move as quickly as possible, she added.

For the Hulschers, it will be about 10 months before they move into their new home in Arden, a standard build time for new single-family homes in Palm Beach County.

They look forward to hitting the trails around Arden and enjoying the open spaces there, they said.

“We love the schools, we love the neighborhood,” Sasha Hulscher said. “It’s just beautiful.”