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Wave of New Urbanism Engulfs Texas Coast

(the following has been excerpted:)

Projects Reflect Broad Push In Beachfront Development; Weathering Housing Woes

By THADDEUS HERRICK

GALVESTON, Texas—In recent years, this barrier island has witnessed a building boom, from single-family homes to high-rise condominiums. But few of the projects are as ambitious as the one planned by Tofigh Shirazi.

Inspired by Seaside, the Florida-panhandle resort community that relies heavily on traditional architecture and planning, Mr. Shirazi is overseeing development of a \$1 billion, 260-acre beachfront community that seeks to reflect Galveston's past. The first of the project's four phases, 160 lots for single-family homes, is sold out. The development is designed to include a pedestrian-friendly mix of homes, shops and two hotels. "This is going to be a real town," he said.

Beachtown, as Mr. Shirazi's project is called, is part of a wave of New Urbanism on the Texas coast, from Galveston to South Padre Island. A planning movement that advocates walking over driving and borrows heavily from the design of traditional neighborhoods, New Urbanism has been largely overlooked on the Texas coast, even as it has flourished in Florida and beyond.

While the movement offers something of a counterpoint to subdivisions, malls and office parks, it is attacked by critics as nostalgic and unimaginative for its reliance on 19th-century architecture. While New Urbanist communities such as Seaside often are pitched as real towns, critics say they tend to become little more than playgrounds for the rich.

But the movement is growing and



Richard Payne

Beachtown, a \$1 billion, 260-acre beachfront community, is designed to include a pedestrian-friendly mix of homes, shops and hotels, and to echo Galveston's past.

could be well-suited to weather the nation's recent real-estate woes, in part because of its appeal to long-term owners instead of just investors. In addition to Beachtown, a 93-acre, \$175 million urban village known as Evia is taking shape in Galveston. The work of local developers, the project will include a total of about 350 residential units, with 70% of the 222 lots for single-family homes sold.

Near Corpus Christi, the Sea Oats Group, of Atlanta, is developing a 64-acre, \$250 million project called Cinnamon Shore that casts itself as a traditional seaside village, complete with a town center. Sales began in February, and 42 of 82 lots in phase one are sold. And on South Padre Island, a development in excess of \$250 million called the Shores of South Padre also portrays itself as New Urbanist, though local developer Richard Franke's plan to include high-rise and

midrise condominiums indicates he is no purist. "It's quite different from anything else in our area," said Mr. Franke.

The projects reflect a broader push to develop the Texas coast, while subprime woes have cooled markets in Florida and elsewhere. On the Third Coast, as some call Texas, the ocean tends to be murkier, the sand darker and the scenery arguably less impressive than on the East and West coasts. But beachfront property still is plentiful, and prices are considerably less expensive than the two coasts.

James Gaines, an economist at Texas A&M University's Real Estate Center, said beachfront property in Texas costs about a fifth of the price of similar property in California, in part because of its geography. Except for Galveston and a few coastal areas near Houston, none of Texas beachfront property is near a major urban center.