

Animal lovers welcome

New home community offers amenities for pets

By Tyler Gray

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

ST. CLOUD — Animal lovers are working with developers to turn a former ranch into a pet project.

The Harmony Institute, a non-profit organization that examines interaction between humans and animals, is moving from Orange County to the planned 4,824-home Birchwood development five miles east of St. Cloud on

U.S. Highway 192. The plans also include the relocation of the Back to Nature Wildlife Refuge from Bithlo to Osceola County.

The institute will have 1,400 acres on which to expand and will serve as the hub of the 5,000-acre pet- and wildlife-friendly community. The land, formerly the Triple E Ranch, was approved for development in 1990. Project organizers are scheduled to unveil their plans at a news conference Thursday.

From built-in containers that

hold 25 pounds of pet food to "Pet Concierge" services for baby-sitting felines and canines, the development is designed for people with critters, says Harmony Institute Chairwoman Martha Eastman Lentz.

"How can we build houses so that it's easier to have a pet in the house? This is what we're trying to achieve," she said.

There's more planned here than doggie doors and pet parks.

Lentz, the former executive director of the Orange County Humane Society, said the community will be a haven for animal lovers and a living example of how pets and nature affect peoples' lives.

It's designed to be a place

where residents and others can spend spare time volunteering at the neighborhood refuge. They can help nurse wounded animals back to health or attend wildlife photography, equestrian or animal therapy seminars at the institute's Albert Schweitzer campus. When homeowners in the community are away, the institute will offer pet bathing and walking services and even an on-call assistant who can feed a pet when a resident is working late.

So why all of the attention to furry friends?

"I don't run into many people who don't know the calming and soothing effects of having a pet in their lives," Lentz says. "There's proof that having an

Animals may help folks stay healthy

HARMONY from 1

children who grow up with animals develop nurturing and a kinder attitude toward other creatures."

She doesn't intend the institute or the development to be a utopian society, but she does think the idea of animal interaction has proved its worth in science and culture.

"It's not going to be the Garden of Eden," Lentz said, but "the interaction people experience with nature has been proven to have beneficial health effects."

Lentz is working closely with the developer — her husband, Jim Lentz, an investment banker in Orange County — who is assembling a development team for the job. In August, Lentz and other investors purchased the Triple E ranch for \$25.6 million, and he plans to build homes similar to those in Disney's Celebration community.

"We think Celebration has done

a great job as far as their outline goes," Jim Lentz said. "We'll start off with a section in the neotraditional town format similar to Celebration."

Lot sizes and number of homes per acre have yet to be determined, but Jim Lentz said the development will build its own water treatment plant, will set aside land for a school and will work with the Harmony Institute to preserve natural spaces. "We think we'll be preserving a lot of the land," he said. "We think 3,000 of the 5,000 acres will be kept in their natural state."

Homes could begin selling in late 2000. Jim Lentz said he expects that high-end homes in the community could fetch more than \$300,000. "We think the market is right for that kind of product," he said. "We want to be a good developer and responsible members of the community."

Some might say, man's best friend.



THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

animal in your life reduces blood pressure. There's proof that chil-

Please see HARMONY, 2