

Model for Development

Planner, designer gets good initial reviews for Government Street concept



Advocate staff photo by ARTHUR D. LAUCK - Michael Hogstrom is developing E'tage Gardens, an eight-home development on a piece of vacant land at Government and Croydon. Supporters say the development is a model of concepts laid out in the FutureBR land use plan.

Timothy Boone | tboone@theadvocate.com

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For nearly a year and a half, Michael Hogstrom passed by an undeveloped tract of land at the intersection of Government Street and Croydon Avenue while commuting to work from his Capital Heights home.

"I could not figure why that property had not been developed," said Hogstrom, the owner of Onsite Design, a real estate planning and design firm. After all, the land was right between downtown and Towne Center and very close to amenities such as Independence Park, the Main Library and BREC's Liberty Lagoon. "Most properties that are vacant in a good area, they're usually contaminated, there's a story behind it."

After doing some research, Hogstrom found the 1.4 acre site was used as farmland 40 years ago.

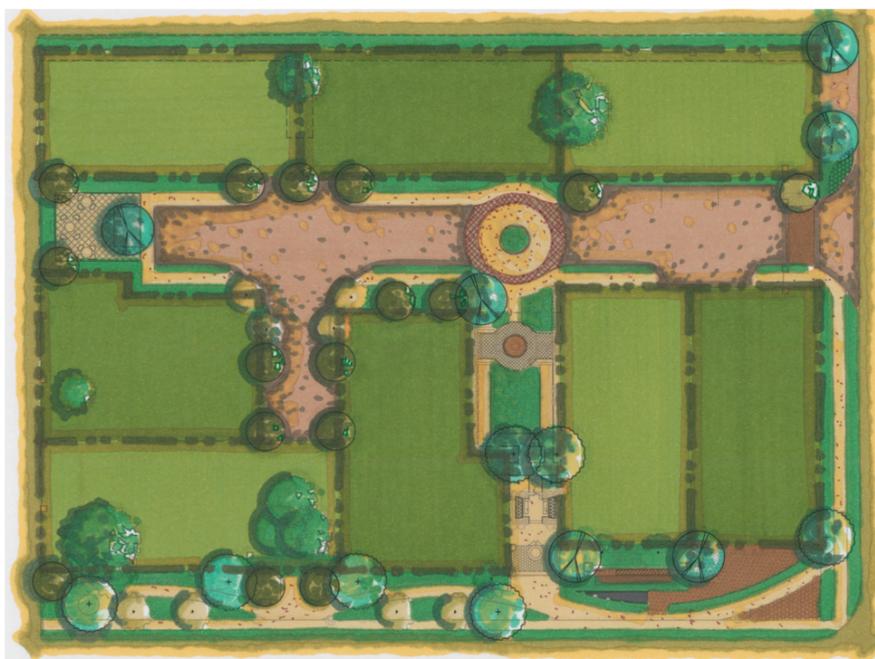
There was talk about putting condos there shortly after Hurricane Katrina, but nothing happened.

Hogstrom's initial curiosity led him to more than a year of meetings with landowners, nearby residents, elected officials, city-parish planners and others, all in an attempt to get the land rezoned for a smart growth development. Last week, the Metro Council approved a request to rezone the land as an infill small planned unit development. It clears the way for work to begin early next year on E'tage Gardens, a community development with eight homes Hogstrom expects will sell for an average of \$345,000. The one- and two-story houses will range in size from 1,500 to 3,000 square feet.

Hogstrom and supporters of E'tage Gardens say the development is a model for denser, creative infill development in Baton Rouge, one of the key points of FutureBR, the city-parish's land use plan that was approved last fall. Hogstrom has even used the FutureBR logo on marketing material for E'tage Gardens, saying the development is a "flagship project" for the land use plan.

"When we first met with the planning commission, they said it was a great FutureBR project," Hogstrom said. The logo doesn't constitute an endorsement, but shows Onsite Design believes in the land use plan, he said.

Elizabeth "Boo" Thomas, president and chief executive officer of the Center for Planning Excellence, said she's pleased to see a real estate developer embrace FutureBR. "Hogstrom is doing an innovative thing and we commend him," she said. E'tage Gardens will even use ideas mentioned in FutureBR that aren't part of the city code yet, like storing trash cans out of sight.



E'tage Gardens site plan rendering provided by Onsite Design.

"This has all the bells and whistles that FutureBR contemplates," said Charles Landry, the prominent smart growth attorney who is representing E'tage Gardens. "This is exciting and what we really want to have. Mike has done an extraordinary job."

Hogstrom, 35, moved to Baton Rouge from Texas in 2008. An LSU graduate, he spent years working with architecture and design firms on projects in the U.S. and Europe. E'tage Gardens is his first attempt at real estate development.

"One constant thread in my work is that smart architecture and smart land planning work together," he said. Hogstrom's work has focused on how small boxes (houses) interact with large boxes (developments).

To that end, the development will feature open spaces and sidewalks to promote community connectivity. To further enhance the feel of E'tage Gardens, all of the homes that face the open spaces or streets must have exterior porches that take up more than half the façade. "We want to make it pedestrian-friendly," Hogstrom said.

Hogstrom will establish design guidelines for all of the homes in E'tage Gardens to make the diverse mix of houses relate to one another. Plans are to start construction on at least three houses by summer 2013. One of them will be occupied by Hogstrom.

Although land sales were on hold until the Metro Council approved the rezoning request, Hogstrom said he had heard "quite a bit of interest from builders and homeowners." Burns & Company is handling the marketing and real estate for the development. The target market for the development is empty nesters and young families that want a smaller, nicer house.

Dennis Vidrine, president of the Goodwood Property Owners Association, said he's "cautiously optimistic" E'tage Gardens will have a positive impact on the immediate area. The association didn't come out for or against the rezoning request. "The developer worked hard to sell the concept and now has set high expectations," Vidrine said in an e-mail. "We expect that he will live up to his promises."

Hogstrom said the development is already having an impact on the surrounding neighborhoods. He's been contacted by three nearby homeowners, who liked the images they saw in the marketing material for E'tage Gardens and now want him to do additions to their houses.

"We've gotten over \$500,000 in contracts for work on homes in Goodwood, Pollard Estates and Lafayette," he said. "They've seen that Onsite Design brings a little something to the table."