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School to give new community special allure

- StoneBridge to be Brandon's biggest development in decades

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Brian Albert Broom/The
Clarion-Ledger

**Dirtwork and road-
building can be seen
throughout the
development.**

BRANDON — In six to eight years, developers hope to finish building a 403-acre, mixed-use project that will include 970 homes, about 100 acres for commercial and retail construction, and a sprawling complex of parks, playgrounds, walking trails and tennis courts.

StoneBridge, a more than \$300 million project that sits partially inside the city limits of Brandon next to its high school on Mississippi 18, is the largest development the city has seen in almost 40 years, said Edwin Sallis of Heartland

Development Co. LLC, the project's lead developer.

And to help maximize its allure, the company donated 16 acres to the Rankin County School District to be used to build an elementary school on site for the county's crowded school system.

It will be called StoneBridge Elementary School.

"Your traditional style of development incorporates work, live and play, and we've added those three plus education," Sallis said.

"It works both ways. Elementary schools are going to drive families, and ... when you bring development here, you don't want to start overcrowding your schools. So this is kind of a way, as a developer, that we can compensate for that. It's a good deal for the school system, and it's a good deal for us."

StoneBridge, with eight neighborhoods, will be more like a small, self-sufficient community where residents won't have to leave the premises to get groceries, dine out, play tennis, go to school, go shopping or go swimming.

There will be a 51-acre lake, a 200-foot stone bridge, a 17-acre nature reserve park, a 16-court professional tennis center, and about three miles of walking trails and sidewalks.

The tract of land now looks like a wide, tree-lined expanse of dirt with some heavy equipment at work, all on land where cattle once grazed.

But developers are in the final stages of their first phase, trying to flesh out 205 single-family residences, that will range from 1,500 to 2,200 square feet and - with an average price of \$190,000 - could serve as starter homes.

Other homes will cater to a range of income brackets, including high-end houses, whose price and square footage have not been determined.

There will be 538 single-family residences, 272 townhomes and 160 independent-living units, which will target empty-nesters or those wanting to downsize.

A four-lane boulevard will serve as the development's main thoroughfare. Construction is expected to begin next month.

Builders already have bought up all the homes in the first phase.

On the commercial and retail side, residents will see more than 750,000 square feet.

Sallis said developers are working to land a major grocer to anchor the first phase then bring in banks, restaurants, coffee shops, boutiques and other retailers.

Property for the new school thrilled the school district.

"That is an area where we desperately needed space," said Hugh Carr, the district's assistant superintendent.

The 36-classroom school will accommodate about 900 second- and third-graders with about 77,500 square feet.

Carr said the district has 36 portable classrooms in use now, and he's adding another 18 on Wednesday.

The city's population has gone from 11,077 in 1990 to an estimated 20,096 in 2006, according to U.S. Census numbers.

"It's not going to get any better as long as people keep continuing to build and buy homes and move in," Carr said. "It's a good problem."

Site work already has begun on the school, which is expected to open in fall 2009, Sallis said.

StoneBridge will incorporate some concepts of new urbanism, an architectural movement that integrates planning with design codes, creating old-fashioned, small-town environments that promote interaction among residents.

"The development is so large in nature, we tried to incorporate some of the new urbanism or traditional styles of neighborhood development, but at the same time, because of the scale, it's very hard to make it a pedestrian-only type development," Sallis said.