

Trails, not golf, draw for buyers

New communities growing around trail running areas

By BRADLEY MELEKIAN The New York Times

When Heath Adcock, a trail runner, and his wife moved to the Denver area a few years ago, he told real estate agents that he wasn't content to be just within driving distance of the wilderness. He wanted to put on his shoes and be darting under a cathedral of trees in no time.

"For me, it's important to be able to go out of my garage and be on a trail in a minute's time," Adcock, 33, said.

To get nature in their backyard, the couple settled in Highlands Ranch, a 8,800-hectare planned community in Douglas County (25 kilometres south of Denver) with nearly 100 kilometres of trails through scrub pine and chaparral. "Some people may say running's running," Adcock said. But "you're getting away from all the hustle and bustle of the streets; it's like a sanctuary."

Access to dirt trails — not just bicycle lanes or sidewalks — is a priority for so many runners like Adcock that housing developers are increasingly carving miles of paths through the wild to attract them. The trend is most pronounced in areas with hectare of open land and sprawling new planned communities. But some crowded towns are finding ways to incorporate trails, hoping to lure the booming number of off-road runners and other trail users.

"For years, developers had been developing golf courses as though it were the only way to sell houses," said Ed McMahon, the senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, a development research group in Washington. "But the vast majority of buyers do not play golf."

"Now we're seeing an explosion of trail systems in new communities," McMahon said, "because developers are starting to catch on to what prospective homebuyers want."

Trails are the No. 1 amenity potential homeowners cite when asked what they would like to see in a new community, ahead of public parks and outdoor pools, according to the National Association of Home Builders. Trails were cited by 57 percent of prospective buyers in a 2004 survey by the association. "All of the evidence we have suggests that demand for trails is increasing," said Gopal Ahluwalia, the vice-president for research at the builders' group.

Running on trails — whether semi-manicured paths of crushed stone built by developers, or forest paths cleared by deer — appeals to runners because of the variety of scenery, greater solitude and softer terrain underfoot.

Off-road running is exploding in popularity because nature lovers have less time to get out into the wild. There are 40 million trail runners across the U.S. as of 2005, according to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, up 22.1 per cent from 1998. In the same period the popularity of other wilderness activities that are more time-consuming declined: backpacking was down 22.5 percent; mountain biking dropped 6.9 percent.

Trail-running clubs, led by the All American Trail Running Association, are finding that developers often spearhead the creation of trail networks. Build trails and homeowners will come — that's the hope of John Robbins, a land developer who is working on three projects that will have extensive trails. "People have had their fill of golf course communities and the same old same old," said Robbins, the president of Greathorn Properties, which is in Concord, N.C