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EAST MANATEE -- A bridge can transform a community.

For Parrish residents, it suddenly became clear in 2015 that things were going to change in a major way when ground was broken for the \$32.69 million Fort Hamer Bridge project and improvements to Upper Manatee River Road and Fort Hamer Road.

Not only would the bridge connect Parrish and Lakewood Ranch when it is completed in early 2017, it would open up a lot of new development.

Developers are already planning to build 23,095 residential units in the North River area, primarily along Moccasin Wallow Road, and State Road 62.

Parrish has become a second development hot spot in East Manatee, along with Lakewood Ranch, which has 17,958 homes approved or pending approval for construction.

Late in the year, work started to widen the northern half of U.S. 301 through Parrish, just in time to serve the proposed new communities, and perhaps help speed along the extension of sewer service to all parts of the village.

Ironically, it will take construction of the new neighborhoods to eventually bring sewer service to all of Parrish.

Sensing the changing pace of development, Parrish residents stepped up their efforts to revitalize their historic village to make it more of a tourist destination, capitalizing on the Florida Railroad Museum and the rowing facility at Fort Hamer Park.

Lakewood Ranch, Manatee County's largest master planned community, continues to evolve.

It has grown to a community of 25,000 residents, and in 2015 celebrated its 20th anniversary with a free party and fireworks at Premier Sports Campus. Also celebrating an anniversary was Lakewood Ranch Main Street which turned 10.

New development at Lakewood Ranch includes Del Webb and other communities and Lakewood Centre north of State Road 70.

Finally, after several years of planning, negotiation, and waiting for the right market conditions, developer Schroeder-Manatee Ranch seems ready to move forward in 2016 with the development of its property in Sarasota County, called Lakewood Ranch Waterside.

Lakewood Ranch Town Hall saw a big change in 2015 with the departure of executive director Eva Rey to be replaced with Anne Ross, assistant town administrator of Longboat Key.

There were other significant changes in the neighborhood as well with the start of construction of the \$74.5 million diverging diamond at the intersection of University Parkway and Interstate 75. Frustrated drivers are hoping the rebuilt intersection will help smooth traffic flow.

In October, The Mall at University Town Center completed its first year of business.

The growth of Lakewood Ranch, the arrival of the new mall, and the rowing facility at Benderson Park, which will host the 2017 World Rowing Championships and the 2018 World Rowing Masters Regatta, are helping transform traffic patterns in the area.

In addition, the rowing facility and Lakewood Ranch's Premier Sports Campus, were helping bring more sports tourism dollars to Manatee-Sarasota.

Premier Sports Campus, which opened in 2011 as a home for all sorts of sports played on grass, is getting new amenities to help make it more inviting for fans, including more than 3,000 stadium seats, restrooms, a concession stand, and meeting room, developer SMR announced late in the year.

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Read more here: <http://www.bradenton.com/news/local/community/lakewood-ranch-herald/article52487050.html#storylink=cpy>