



Construction workers building a new home in Lehigh Acres, a vast exurban community east of Fort Myers in Florida. BRYAN CEREIJO FOR WSJ

Priced Out In Florida? This Place Is Booming.

BY ARIAN CAMPO-FLORES

LEHIGH ACRES, Fla.—Desiree and Christian De Leon, Miami natives who spent years renting in South Florida and Orlando, wanted to buy a house somewhere in the state and start building equity. Yet the cost of living kept climbing in each place they went, pushing home prices out of their reach.

Then they discovered Lehigh Acres, a vast exurban community east of Fort Myers where Desiree's parents had moved and where plenty of listings were in their price range. Last year, they bought a newly built three-bedroom house for \$328,000, with a monthly mortgage payment almost equal to what they were paying in rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Orlando.

"We were so impressed with what Lehigh has to offer," Desiree, 37 years old, said. "The possibilities were endless."

Lehigh Acres, about 17 miles from Fort Myers, is booming, fueled by arrivals from Miami and elsewhere who are drawn to one of the few remaining affordable areas in the southern part of the state. Florida more broadly is contending with an affordability problem, as soaring home

prices and living costs have prompted many residents to leave the state's more-expensive metro areas and have shrunk the stream of people moving in. Recently released federal data show the Miami metro area's cost of living has surpassed that of the New York metro area.

That leaves a place like Lehigh Acres, a unique community that has endured an economic roller-coaster over the decades. The unincorporated area, carved out of the Florida wilderness in the 1950s, mushroomed beginning in the 1990s, cratered during the 2007-10 subprime-mortgage crisis and has been climbing its way back since.

It is now reinventing itself again, with growth that is moving faster than its roads, water lines and services can handle. Its working-class and middle-class residents include teachers, police officers, construction workers and servicesector employees.

"The growth is phenomenal," said Michael Welch, chairman of the East Lee County Chamber of Commerce, which covers Lehigh Acres. "I think it caught everyone off guard...And the infrastructure hasn't kept up with it."

Lehigh Acres sprang up more than 70 years ago when wealthy Chicago businessman Lee Ratner and some partners began buying thousands of acres of ranchland and eventually divided it into more than 100,000 residential lots. They invested little in infrastructure, leaving most homes to rely on private wells and septic systems.

The lack of urban planning has contributed to a sprawling, disjointed feel. A seemingly endless network of roads unfurls in a massive grid, generally without sidewalks, curbs or landscaping. Because many parcels remain undeveloped in the farther reaches of Lehigh Acres, streets often contain an unorthodox mix of sleek new homes, 1970s-style ranch houses and empty, overgrown lots.

Lehigh Acres has no downtown or central shopping district, just a smattering of strip malls dominated by dollar stores and mom-and-pop shops. Only recently have brands such as Starbucks and Chipotle arrived. The area serves as a bedroom community for employment centers in Fort Myers and Naples, so its main thoroughfares are choked with outbound traffic in the morning and inbound traffic in the afternoon.

The community experienced a frenzy of home construction in the 2000s, powered by easy credit. Then the subprime-mortgage crisis hit in 2007, foreclosures skyrocketed and home values plummeted. Over time, new buyers arrived to snap up cheap homes and the area slowly began growing again. Note

The Covid pandemic and the state's growing affordability problems turbocharged development in Lehigh Acres, said Mike Darda, a real-estate agent with Compass.

In Lehigh Acres, three-bedroom homes in one new development, Avalon, start at \$264,000. The median sale price in Lehigh Acres was \$310,000 in May, compared with \$652,000 in Miami, according to real-estate broker-age Redfin.

There were 3,659 building permits issued for new singlefamily homes in Lehigh Acres for the year ended in March, a 14% increase over the previous year, according to real-estate firm LSI. By comparison, 3,500 such permits were issued in total between 2012 and 2020.

Melissa Orta moved to Lehigh Acres from Miami five years ago. She bought a threebedroom house for \$280,000 and, sensing Lehigh Acres had enormous potential, became a real-estate agent specializing in the area.

Orta has been busy ever since. She said Lehigh Acres has long contended with negative associations from the foreclosure crisis, but that it is steadily shedding that image.

"After Covid and the affordability crisis, families were like, 'Where can I have my American dream?'" Orta, 26, said.

One of her clients is Kai Kirkman, who moved to Fort Myers from Cincinnati in 2024 to take a job as an operations manager at Amazon.com. After living there for a year, he said, he began house-hunting and fell in love with Lehigh Acres for its spaciousness and family-oriented vibe.

Last year, Kirkman, 29, bought a three-bedroom house with a two-car garage and a lap pool for \$330,000. One of his friends plans to buy in the area, he said, and his mother and grandmother are thinking of following suit.

The population of Lehigh Acres increased to 114,000 in 2020 from 87,000 in 2010, according to U.S. Census Bureau data, and local leaders estimate the current count at about 135,000. Its makeup is 49% Hispanic, 28% white and 18% Black, census figures show.

The community's median household income of \$66,890 trails the state's overall figure of \$74,568, while its 17.1% poverty rate exceeds the 12% rate for all of Florida.

Lehigh Acres, which has no mayor or city council, is straining to keep up with its growth, said Welch, the chamber-of-commerce head. Law enforcement is stretched, the multitude of wells is draining the aquifer and some residents' low wages result in reliance on social services.

Some homes are packed with occupants sharing costs, resulting in driveways and yards clogged with a halfdozen or more vehicles.

Marlyn Castner, 71, who moved down from Portage, Mich., and bought a condo in 2022, said she considers such sights eyesores, along with recreational vehicles parked in yards. The potential effect on property values concerns her.

"You go to Naples, you don't see that kind of stuff," Castner said.

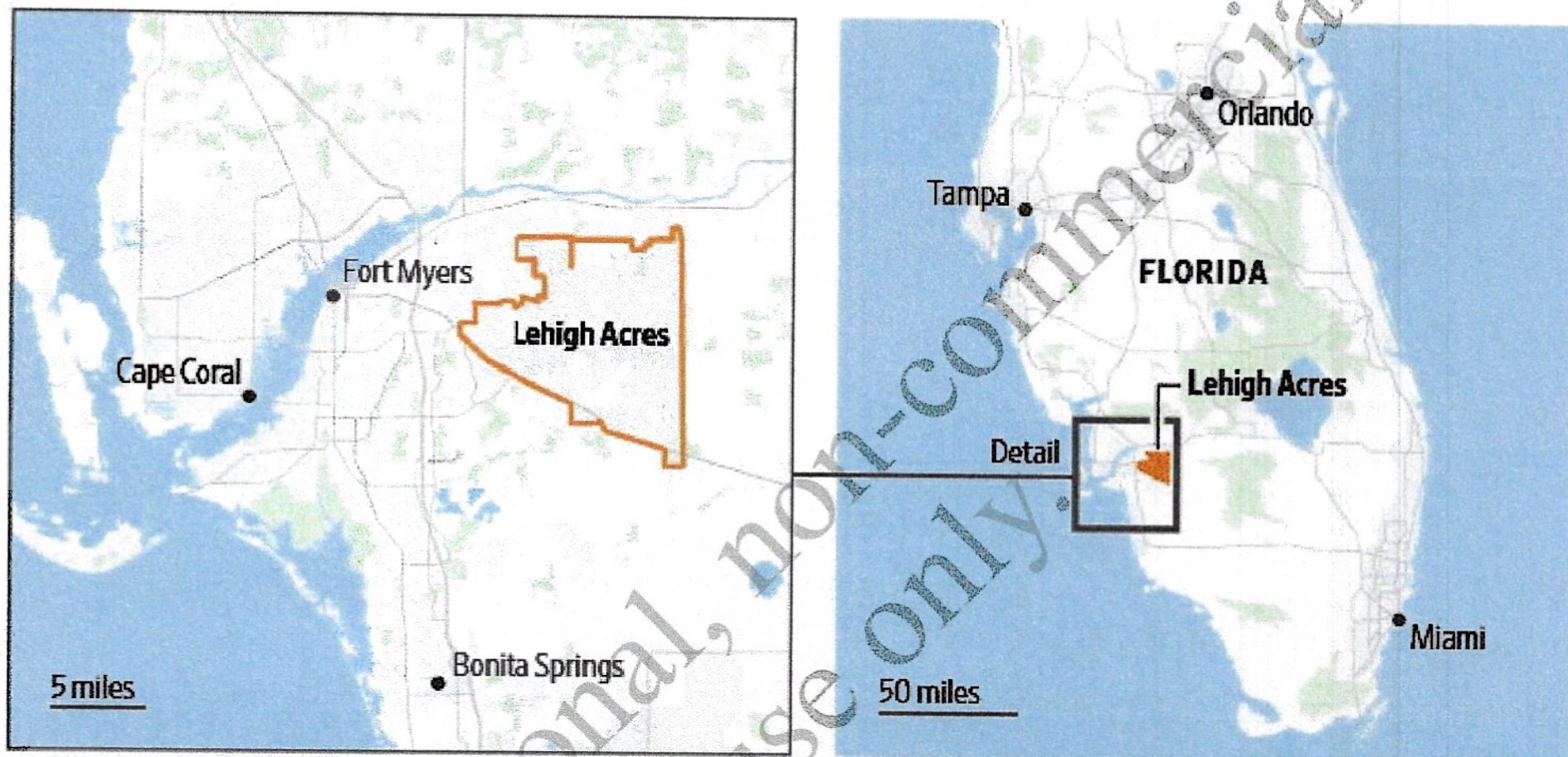
Some residents have pushed for Lehigh Acres to incorporate into a city to better respond to the community's needs. But given the lower home values, it lacks the property-tax base to support such a move.

The community relies heavily on funding from surrounding Lee County to staff law enforcement, repave roads and widen arteries connecting Lehigh Acres to the region, said Cecil Pendergrass, chairman of the board of county commissioners. In 2023 and 2024, the county funded projects in Lehigh Acres valued at about \$370 million, he said. Coming plans include working with the water utility to expand service and get more residents off wells and septic systems.

Private investment is moving in as well. Healthcare providers have built facilities so residents don't need to travel to Fort Myers for care. New commercial development is on the way that will add more shops and restaurants.

"Lehigh Acres is now reinventing itself," Welch said. "It's tough, but they're doing it."

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