

Western Horsemanship > equestrian communities

A CENTURY OF industrialization and a seemingly unstoppable surge in real-estate development have erased horse-centric communities from maps in many parts of the country, replacing once-tranquil pasturelands and remote trails with subdivisions, strip malls and city streets.

Much to horse owners' chagrin, such transformations are often abetted by local governments that pass zoning restrictions and enact tax codes making horse-owning lifestyles increasingly difficult and eventually impossible.

The good news: there are still a few communities left—and new ones popping up—where owning a horse is not only allowed, but encouraged, through horse-friendly zoning, tax incentives and bold efforts to attract horse-owning residents.

Here's a look at some of the country's top horsemen's havens, communities where horse owners' interests take priority over those of developers, and where equestrians play the biggest role in ambitious strategies to boost, and even reinvent, local economies.

10 Great Hometowns

STORY BY ANDRA BRICHACEK

Where Horses Come First

1 NORCO, CALIFORNIA >>

Ironically, our top pick is smack in the middle of Southern California, where widespread displacement of landowners by real-estate development began in the 1960s. Farsighted equestrians realized even then that to preserve their way of life they had to act immediately. Many moved inland to Riverside County, where land was inexpensive and plentiful.

There, the city of Norco incorporated in 1964, with an eye toward forming an equestrian community. Even as freeways and commercial complexes rose up around Norco over the years, town commissioners never wavered from their commitment to this ideal, and in recent years they've redoubled their efforts to promote the town's uniqueness as an equestrian retreat.

The city charter specifies half-acre lot minimums and protects the town's 120 miles of horse trails, which flank every residential street and, in place of sidewalks, the downtown's main drag. The commercial district invites residents to travel on horseback, with hitching posts and water tanks outside businesses, and horse-height "equestrian crossing" buttons on traffic lights.

"We want to let people know when they come to look at homes in Norco that this is a horse community," says Brian Oulman, the city's economic-development director. "That's what the city is known for and what we try to encourage."

To accommodate visitors, as well as the town's 17,000 horses, the city is pouring \$12 million into its George Ingalls Equestrian Events Center, which hosts Profes-



sional Rodeo Cowboys Association rodeos, Norco Horse Week and the Norco Valley Fair. The city's 122-acre Silverlakes property has just become the new site of the Oaks Blenheim Riding Park, which hosted Olympic trials and national championship events at its former San Juan Capistrano location.

A photograph showing two women riding horses on a dirt path. The woman in the foreground is wearing a plaid shirt and blue jeans, riding a dark brown horse. The woman behind her is wearing a red shirt, blue jeans, and a black cowboy hat, riding a black and white pinto horse. The path is bordered by a brick wall on the left and a residential street with houses and trees in the background.

for Horsemen

Above: Norco, California's unequaled support for its horse-owning residents lands it at the top of our list of equine-friendly communities. The Southern California town boasts 120 miles of protected riding trails, including those that flank residential streets.

Left: It isn't uncommon to find hitching rails and water tanks outside businesses in Norco's commercial district, where horse traffic is not only allowed, but encouraged.

2 HIGHLAND, MICHIGAN

When horse owner Sharon Greene decided to attend Highland's 2001 township planning meeting, the area's economic destiny was forever altered.

"I told them I live here because we have 20 acres, four arenas for horse shows, and a Pony Club chapter at Milford High School," she recalls. "Milford had the first high-school equestrian team in the country, and my township board didn't know it."

The board asked Greene and her fellow equestrians to create an economic-impact study and draw up a proposal to promote Highland as Michigan's first official "equestrian community." By 2006, the state granted the designation.

Highland is running with the idea. Its Downtown Development Association recently voted to add hitching posts, watering tanks and a stabling area to downtown Highland, so riders can exit trails in Highland State Recreation Area, which borders the town center, and make stops at local businesses.

Last year, the city launched a new event called "Horsin' Around," featuring a Western art show, barn tour, carriage rides and trail rides. The Highland Equestrian Conservancy has negotiated two conservation easements, with horse trails, around new developments, and a new 262-acre park will act as a hub, linking the town's expanding trail network.

And, to add to its groundbreaking high-school team, Highland now has the nation's first middle-school equestrian team.

3 FRANKLINVILLE, NEW YORK

Once a thriving dairy town, this village of 1,800 in southwestern New York was hit hard in the 1990s by a drop in milk prices. As dairy farmers packed up and left, the town's economy sunk into a recession and the area seemed ripe for real-estate development.

Residents, however, didn't want the town to lose its rural character. Inspired by the numerous local equestrians who already enjoyed the area's ideal soil, affordable land and beautiful scenery, Franklinville began promoting its equine-friendliness. Now, the once-at-risk dairy town is on the fast track to horse heaven.

Franklinville's annual Creekside Roundup began in 2003 and now includes trail rides, horsemanship clinics, breed exhibits, Western and English horse shows, carriage drives and an equine parade. The village has also added 20 miles of new horse trails to complement nearly 80 miles of trails within nearby Allegany State Park and Pine Hill State Forest.

The town plans to expand its trail system, build a new training center to add to two already in existence, develop several "bed & barn" inns to house tourists and their horses, and further promote equine economic development throughout Cattaraugus County, with efforts that will include a 200-mile wagon train and stagecoach run.

4 TRYON, NORTH CAROLINA

Residents cite Tryon's good grass, mild climate and unparalleled views of the Blue Ridge Mountains—not to mention more than 100 miles of riding trails from which to see them—as its best features.

But according to resident Maureen Gallatin, a horse-industry consultant and founder of InspiredbyHorses.com, Tryon's equestrian community is the town's biggest draw.

"When I was moving from California, I researched to find a community that appreciated horses," she says. "I wanted to keep a horse on grass, with room to graze and be a horse."

Because Tryon is in a region officially deemed an "enhanced voluntary agricultural district," enrolled horse farms that agree not to develop their properties for non-agricultural purposes for at least 10 years are allowed to conduct activities—at any time of the day or night, no less—without the threat of lawsuits from disgruntled neighbors. They're also exempt from water and sewer assessments, can have the state pay up to 90 percent of waste-management costs, and are prioritized for conservation grants.

Standing at the center of the town of 1,800 is its official mascot, the 22-hand fiberglass Tryon Horse, lovingly referred to as "Morris." He represents Tryon residents' devotion to their horses and to equestrian events ranging from fox hunting and steeplechase to barrel racing and roping.

The U.S. Equestrian Team and horse trainers from northern states winter in Tryon, and its Foothills Equestrian Nature Center, a nature education and recreation facility with 300 acres of trails and fields for riding, hosted 2007's National Equine Economic Development Summit, where representatives from equestrian communities across the country gathered to compare notes about the best ways to make horse-friendliness work for them.

5 LOUDOUN COUNTY, VIRGINIA

At the heart of Northern Virginia lies Loudoun County, whose 16,000 horses claim the distinction of being the largest concentration of equines in the state. Even Loudoun faced the threat of industrialization in the 1990s, but its county seat took a different approach to the problem than did most.

"The county government tries to fund rural efforts because it wants to make sure agriculture stays here," explains Warren Howell, Jr., county manager for innovative economic development. "We figure that rural businesses that are making money won't sell out to developers, and therefore we can keep a strong rural presence here."

To that end, in 2001 the county adopted its "200,000-Acre Solution," referring to the land that makes up the western two-thirds of Loudoun County. The plan rezoned the rural region with 15- and 40-acre lot minimums and stated an official preference for the interests of rural businesses over residential development.

Unlike some areas, Loudoun includes horse businesses in the agricultural designation and allows them tax exemptions. The plan's primary goal—doubling the value of the agricultural industry by 2008—was achieved on schedule.

Loudoun County is also funding the expansion of horse trails in the area, working toward a countywide network connecting city parks. Westmoreland Davis Park includes a 1,200-acre agricultural learning center and Morven Park Equestrian Center, but the government is actively pursuing another, even larger horse park. The Upperville Horse & Colt Show, the oldest horse show in the country, welcomes Olympic and World Cup horses each June, and Marion du Pont Scott Equine Medical Center near Leesburg is a leading veterinary research and treatment center.

Historically Horse-Friendly

1 LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

Widely recognized as the Horse Capital of the World, Lexington was a shoe-in to be the first North American host of the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, which will be held at the Kentucky Horse Park, a showcase of equine-related museums, galleries, theaters, exhibits and riding trails.

Kentucky is arguably the most horse-friendly state in the union, as the \$4 billion equine industry is its number-one “cash crop.” The state government protects this claim to fame by bankrolling a statewide breeder’s incentive fund and purchasing development rights to protect area horse farms.

2 AUBREY, TEXAS

Many place the Horse Capital of Texas in Aubrey, a tiny town in the heart of North Texas horse country. Legend has it that the horse folk flocked to Aubrey—and nearby communities such as Pilot Point, Gainesville and Whitesboro—in the 1980s for the good weather, sandy loam soil and proximity to top-tier Western events in Fort Worth and Oklahoma City. The town’s population of 1,500 includes some of the world’s top stock-horse trainers and most-respected equine veterinarians. A favorite riding area is on the trails in Ray Roberts Lake State Park.



The North Texas community of Aubrey—and nearby towns such as Gainesville, Pilot Point and Whitesboro—have long been home to some of the stock-horse world’s top names.

3 SARATOGA SPRINGS, NEW YORK

Saratoga Springs, home to the National Museum of Racing and the Thoroughbred Hall of Fame, is best known for its races, but the region is also home to barrel racers and rodeo cowboys. In hopes of promoting its equine-based economy, the government plans to open New York's first horse park, a Northeastern counterpart to the Kentucky Horse Park, with national-level events in hunt-seat and Western disciplines.

Saratoga County has the highest horse concentration in New York, and horse businesses are eligible for agricultural tax exemptions. Saratoga equine entrepreneurs can also get free advice from the Cornell Cooperative Extension program.

4 WELLINGTON, FLORIDA

The Winter Equestrian Festival—the world's largest horse show—brings about 4,500 horses and their owners to Wellington's famous Palm Beach Polo Equestrian Club each year. In 2008, the U.S. Olympic show jumping trials

and the Nations Cup took place during the festival, but that's nothing new. Olympic equestrians have trained in Wellington for years, enjoying the sunny weather and miles of horse trails that its 55,000 residents ride all year. Town officials are even investigating turning one of its most abundant resources, horse manure, into a source of electricity.

5 AIKEN, SOUTH CAROLINA

Wander Aiken's charming town center and you will see its dedication to equine history in the street names immortalizing champion horses and the equestrian sculptures in front of key businesses.

The area's good soil and spectacular climate were the initial attraction for the town's earliest equestrians, wealthy fox-hunting and steeplechase aficionados who made Aiken their winter playground at the turn of the 20th century. Those who remained started the Aiken Steeplechase Association, which holds the Imperial Cup and Holiday Cup each year to much fanfare. Many Kentucky Derby winners also had their start in Aiken. 🐾

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