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Article published Dec 4, 2006

## RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE

# Rivé Isle has overcome multiple obstacles

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**PARRISH** -- Longboat Key resident William Vernon, head of the Vernon Group, describes himself as someone who is "low key" and likes "to stay under the radar."

His latest project, Rivé Isle Golf and Nautical Estates, is such an unusual feat of engineering and permitting that Vernon's low-profile days may be over.

The 55-year-old Florida native and Florida State graduate has been a licensed contractor since 1974.

After working as a builder, Vernon gravitated toward development and has completed about 15 major projects in recent decades, including Longboat Key Moorings and northern Manatee County's River Wilderness Golf and Country Club.

The publicity-shy Vernon has completed billions of dollars worth of projects, yet has no Web site for his own development company.

In 1995, Vernon plunked down \$6 million to buy 1,400 acres east of Interstate 75 in Parrish, along the Manatee River.

Most of the land went to the development of River Wilderness, which today hosts 700 homes and the associated 18-hole golf club.

But Vernon kept eyeballing 500 acres of wetlands and islands he also owned that were deemed "unbuildable by the banks" because they were below the Manatee River's flood plain.

After four years and \$1.5 million in fees and studies, in a masterstroke of visionary development and bureaucratic maneuvering, Vernon has been able to get a plan approved for Rivé Isle Golf and Nautical Estates, a 230-acre residential community.

In order to get the final go-ahead for the project Vernon needed permits, permission and input from "everybody on earth" -- the Army Corps of Engineers, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Florida Wildlife Service, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, Manatee County and even Gov. Jeb Bush, because the project was deemed "a development of critical concerns."



STAFF PHOTO / NINA GREIPEL

William Vernon, the developer of Rivé Isle, needed approval from several state and federal agencies, and even Gov. Jeb Bush, to get his project

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STAFF PHOTO / NINA GREIPEL

William Vernon, the developer of Rivé Isle, needed approval from several state and federal agencies, and even Gov. Jeb Bush, to get his project moving.

It was so involved that Vernon doubts a similar project could get off the ground at all today.

To make it all work, Vernon dredged and moved 1.25 million cubic yards, literally mountains of dirt, to raise the entire island site "four to six feet above the FEMA flood plain, so homeowners won't require flood insurance, which is a huge expense today," Vernon said.

He dredged existing harbors and canals, which provided the landfill needed to build up the island. The site also required Vernon to build six bridges, at about \$1 million each.

Vernon was required to create a 250-acre protected wetland on his property and deeded another large Manatee River island to the state.

But in return, he got permits for 156 of the planned 178 estate sites to have private boat docks.

So far, the first phase, consisting of 35 lots, is "about sold out," Vernon said.

Each home, including the lot, will cost a minimum of \$1.5 million.

The construction of infrastructure is nearing completion.

In January, Vernon will open a temporary sales center. It will be used until the permanent community club and guest boating dock, the River Lodge -- a boating, kayaking and rowing center -- is completed.

Residents will have access to the River Lodge and all its amenities: cooking facilities, community dock, boat launch and kayak storage.

The lodge will look over the Manatee River, and residents will have access to guided boat tours to explore the waterways and choose their homesite from the river.

Four of the six community bridges began construction in October. The bridges are lined with wrought iron lampposts, balustrade railings and have a 14-foot clearance.

The bridges provide direct access to the Manatee River and, 10 miles beyond, to the Gulf of Mexico. A direct cut allows enough depth for larger boats.

Road construction and paving at Rivé Isle is being done by L.A. Enterprises Inc. of Palmetto

Home builders include John Cannon Homes Inc., Peregrine Homes Inc., Pruett Builders Inc. and Arthur Rutenberg Homes. Lee Wetherington Homes was slated to be a member of the builder group, but withdrew.

Building styles will be offered in traditional, Mizner, Mediterranean and Spanish styles.

"I am confident about Rivé Isle's progression in construction," Vernon said when asked about the weak realty market.

Vernon said the development will attract folks interested in boating, golfing and a natural setting.

"With the first phase almost sold out, we expect Rivé Isle's recent construction progress to continue the high level of interest and feedback we're currently receiving from the local area and potential buyers," Vernon said.

Rivé Isle offers membership, at about \$25,000, in River Wilderness, a championship golf course designed by Ted McAnlis, a clay tennis court, a 3,800-square-foot fitness center with state-of-the-art equipment, massage therapist and fitness director, a Junior Olympic-sized swimming pool with cabana area, and a country club restaurant, lounge and banquet operation.

Vernon's custom homes and communities have been featured in Architectural Record, Florida Architect and Vanity Fair.

He also is involved in another major waterfront project in Texas.

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