



SYD KITSON

He's building a sustainable city

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IF OTHER AMBITIOUS REAL ESTATE developers in Florida are shooting for the moon, Kitson & Partner's Babcock Ranch is aiming for the sun: a utopic, future-minded town of 19,500 homes and 50,000 people built from scratch and powered entirely by solar energy, with six million-square feet of retail and schools and electric cars and hiking trails linked to a 74,000-acre preserve, often cited as the largest land conservation deal in the state's history.

Syd Kitson, a well spoken and disarmingly cordial 57-year-old, 6-foot 4-inch former Green Bay Packers offensive lineman, is the man behind this vision. It's been 30 years since his days on the gridiron but Mr. Kitson still appears fit enough to leap back into uniform if necessary, or at least out of bed early. He works out for about an hour and a half each morning around 5:30 before work.

His job requires him to travel around the state, pursuing the firm's developments such as Talis Park in Naples, a gated community that features multi-million dollar mansions. But Babcock, whose 91,000 acres unfold across both Lee and Charlotte counties, has become a life's work requiring remarkable persistence. The building process stalled for nearly a decade because of the recession but this year has started again, he said.

If the \$2 billion development is finished in 20-plus years as planned, Mr. Kitson would be nearing 80. His hope is to drive through town at Babcock when he reaches that age and see his dream, the ultimate "sustainable city," come to life.

Mr. Kitson grew up in a small town, New Providence, N.J., in the 1970s. As a boy, his mom sent him out in the morning to hang with friends and play sports, and told him to be home for dinner or before dark. His home included two sisters, one bathroom and "incredible parents" (his mom worked in retail and his dad was a metallurgist), all adding



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up to "a really good childhood."

Football was a big deal in Mr. Kitson's hometown. He played at New Providence High School for Coach Frank Bottone, a local legend who founded the football program there. Although he would ultimately end up at Wake Forest University on a football scholarship and drafted in the NFL, his beginnings were less illustrious.

Benched his sophomore year as a back up player, he finally got a chance to play when a dislocated elbow disabled the team's defensive end. Coach Bottone sent in Mr. Kitson.

"He was so excited to run in, he ran into the wrong huddle," the opposing team's, recalled Coach Bottone, who is 84 and retired in 2010.

Mr. Kitson hasn't changed much, he said: "He showed a lot of enthusiasm and worked hard."

Mr. Bottone has stayed in touch with Mr. Kitson and his own wife and two children over the years. They still gather for a traditional yearly dinner when they can. Mr. Kitson is particularly fond

of Mrs. Bottone's banana cream pie.

"He's just from a great family," Mrs. Bottone said, "and stayed loyal and hardworking and a leader and a good sense of humor and just everything you'd want in a person."

After five years with Green Bay and a season with the Dallas Cowboys fizzled out, Mr. Kitson left football and started a real estate company. He came to Florida from New Jersey in the mid 1990s when his company bought a country club that had been foreclosed on in West Palm Beach, where he lives now. Kitson & Partners often bought distressed properties, but he wanted to make something of his own, the company's own, from the ground up. When he was introduced to the Babcock property, he had already envisioned his sustainable city while other developers wanted to build out the entire thing.

"We said to the family, 'look, we can't pay you as much as everyone else but our idea was to preserve as much of this ranch as possible and build the most

sustainable new town that's possible on this property,' and they thought it was a great idea."

Mr. Kitson and his firm ended up at the helm of a public-private deal on the property that played out over more than five years and involved state and county governments and environmental groups.

Kitson & Partners purchased 91,000 acres. It sold 73,000 to Florida and Lee County as preservation lands, and agreed to build the Babcock Ranch community on the 18,000 remaining acres, and to preserve about half of that as well.

"When you do the math, 90 percent of the original ranch is in preservation forever, so we're very proud of that," Mr. Kitson said.

Florida Power & Light also agreed to build a 75 megawatt solar electric facility to supply the town's power and then some.

"We'll always produce more solar energy than we use," he said. "We're very proud of the fact that we'll be a net exporter of solar energy, very proud of that." ■

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