



Natasha Geiling

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Reporter at ThinkProgress. Contact me: [ngeiling@americanprogress.org](mailto:ngeiling@americanprogress.org)

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## This Florida Town Wants To Become The Most Sustainable Community In America



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When Florida real estate developer Syd Kitson began conceptualizing Babcock Ranch, a planned community located some 20 minutes from Florida's Fort Myers in 2006, he had a singular goal in mind: prove that a new development could exist in harmony with the environment around it.

A decade later, Kitson's initial vision is about to become a reality. Coinciding with Earth Day, Babcock Ranch had its official reveal on Friday, April 22, with construction on the community's homes set to begin this summer. If all goes according to plan, Kitson expects that residents will begin moving into the community sometime next year. When the project is completed, it will pull all of its energy needs from a neighboring 74.5-megawatt solar power plant, which will supply the community with more solar power than they can use from Day One.

"We'll always be producing more solar energy than energy we are actually using, and we're very proud of that. And when it's not solar

power, it's going to be natural gas, which might be the cleanest mix you can find in the country," Kitson told ThinkProgress.



CREDIT: Kitson & Partners

Kitson's real estate development company, Kitson & Partners, originally purchased the land in 2005—a sprawling, 91,000 acre parcel along the southwest Florida coast. Almost immediately, Kitson sold 73,000 acres of the land back to the state, which eventually became the Babcock Ranch Preserve, one of the largest single purchases of conservation land in Florida's history.

With the remaining 17,000 or so acres, Kitson knew he wanted to build a community that gave back to the land surrounding it. One of the first issues that Kitson had to contend with was the energy needs of a community of that size—a community that would include not just homes, but businesses, schools, and research facilities.

“We started looking into renewable energy and really wanted to reduce our carbon footprint, and we understand that there are a whole variety of solutions to energy and our energy needs,” Kitson said. His team considered everything from wind to biomass to geothermal, but in the end, found their inspiration from the state's nickname.

“We had this vision of making Babcock Ranch the first solar town in America,” he said. “When you look at Florida, we're in the Sunshine

State. That's not that difficult to figure out.”



A rendering of homes at Babcock Ranch. CREDIT: Kitson & Partners

Figuring out how to actually build a solar-powered community, however—especially in the notoriously-solar-unfriendly state of Florida—hasn't been an easy road for those involved in Babcock Ranch. Kitson says he was lucky to find willing partners in Florida Power and Light (FPL), a Florida-based utility company, who agreed from the beginning to be involved in the project.

But concerns about cost plagued the project from the beginning, and Florida's own legislative bodies didn't do much to help create an environment where solar could compete with other energy options. Kitson and others involved with the project tried for years to convince Florida legislators to pass legislation that would allow utilities to recover some initial costs from solar power as a part of their energy portfolio. At the time, Florida law only allowed cost recovery for utilities that were utilizing the cheapest form of energy—in most cases, that meant prioritizing dirty fossil fuels like coal.

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Kitson and his colleagues were never able to convince Florida to

amend their cost recovery program, but as they worked to convince legislators about the benefits of solar, an incredible thing happened—the costs associated with solar power began to come down, eventually becoming competitive—at least at the larger, utility-scale level—with traditional options like coal or natural gas.

“It wasn’t until we were able to prove that this is the same cost as any other form of energy that it made sense to do this,” Kitson said.

The FPL solar plant that will eventually supply Babcock’s residents with their electricity needs is already under construction, and will be operational by the end of this year. But the Babcock experience has also given FPL some inspiration to grow their solar capacity throughout the state, with two more solar plants, each 75 megawatts, also under construction. All told, the three plants will expand FPL’s solar capacity by 30 percent.

When the sun shines, electricity from the solar plant will flow directly to Babcock Ranch, with the excess power then being fed back into the grid. At night, or at times when the sun doesn’t shine, the community will receive its power from a natural gas plant, also owned and operated by FPL. But Kitson expects that the solar plant’s output will far exceed the communities needs, feeding enough solar power onto the grid to effectively cancel out the natural gas used at night or in stormy weather.

“On the renewable energy side, it took us eight or nine years to get it done. That’s a long time, but hopefully the next time, it gets a little easier, and people can look at it and say, “That works,”” Kitson said. “We want to prove to everybody that this strategy that we have can be replicated and can be done all over the country.”



A rendering of the town square at Babcock Ranch. CREDIT: Kitson & Partners

Solar power is just the beginning of Kitson’s plans to transform Babcock Ranch into what Kitson & Partners call “the most sustainable, most innovative and health-focused new town in the country.” The town itself is being constructed on an old sod farm, which will minimize the trees that need to be cleared to make way for the development. There are plans for autonomous electric vehicles to run the town’s public transportation fleet. All buildings constructed within the community will be built so that solar panels could eventually be installed on their roofs. The community’s initial downtown structures will all have solar shade structures, outfitted with solar panels, and have roofs that could accommodate more panels should the owner decide they want to expand their capacity. Kitson hopes that, eventually, sustainable energy companies will bring their businesses and research facilities to Babcock Ranch, using the community as a sort of living laboratory. And there will be some 50 miles of nature trails winding throughout the community, a constant reminder to the town’s residents of the natural environment that surrounds them—and in a state as car-dependent as Florida, Babcock Ranch’s trails and network of walkable paths can be seen as major steps toward sustainability.

It’s Kitson’s hope that the town will attract a wide range of residents, from those deeply interested in sustainability to those just looking for a way to reduce their own personal footprint. The community will offer an assortment of housing options, from condos and to expansive homes, with prices ranging from the low \$200,000s to \$900,000.

In the end, Kitson hopes that Babcock Ranch will become more than a singular experiment in sustainable planning.

“This is open to everybody,” he said. “We want people to come and hike on our trails. We want people to come and participate in our events. We want to create a true town feeling.”

The project has not come without objections from the surrounding community, however. The South Florida Wildlands Association, a nonprofit working to protect wildlife, habitat, and wilderness throughout south Florida, has strongly criticized the Babcock Ranch project, arguing that the development will have a hugely negative impact on the Florida panther, a highly endangered sub-species of pumas whose entire breeding population lies just south of the proposed development site. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are approximately 100 Florida panthers currently alive in the wild, living in an area that is less than five percent of their historic range.



A Florida panther. CREDIT: Shutterstock

In 2006, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a report that singled out two parcels of public land—one directly West and one directly East of the proposed Babcock Ranch site, as the best possible option for expanding the breeding area of the Florida panther. According to Matthew Schwartz, executive director of the South Florida Wildlands Association, constructing the Babcock Ranch development will essentially remove these public areas as options for panther breeding.

“I can’t tell you how bad it is for the panther,” Schwartz said, arguing

that Kitson is developing the community “in the nexus of important public lands.” By building the community near what could be an important wildlife corridor for panthers looking to move from their southern breeding grounds to northern areas, Schwartz worries that the development will essentially trap the panthers into their existing breeding areas.

“It means that the panthers can never expand naturally out of the area that they are in now,” he said. “This project is one of the worst I can imagine, in terms of location.”

Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon of Florida, told ThinkProgress that although Florida panthers could potentially move from their southern breeding grounds to more northern areas, this has not been observed in the decade or so that they have been tracking the panthers’ migrations. He also noted that Kitson & Partners agreed, as part of their initial purchase of the land, to set aside the most environmentally sensitive areas—74,000 acres—as the Babcock Reserve, and only develop the areas closest to existing roads.

“It was a compromise that we worked out, because [the environmental groups] didn’t have the funds to buy the entire ranch,” Draper said. “Would we have liked to have protected the entire 93,000 acres? That would have been great. We had been working on that for years and it just didn’t come off.”

He noted that the Florida legislature has greatly reduced the amount of money allocated to purchasing and managing environmentally sensitive lands, leaving environmental groups with few options when contending with businesses looking to capitalize on South Florida’s rapid development.

“There’s a huge demand for land for development,” Draper said. “The smartest strategy is to try to get landowners to do what Kiston did, which is concentrate the land development on small parts closest to the existing urban areas, and to use the development rights transfers and other things to protect the large pieces in the more remote areas.”

### **Update:**

This post has been updated to include information about the project’s

potential impact on the Florida panther.







