

HORSE COUNTRY

County's growth has factions clashing

■ Horse Country, a slice of Kendall that is supposed to be reserved for homes and farms, has become a magnet for expanding churches and schools.

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When Ron Schaff moved in 25 years ago, he surrounded himself with acres of rare palms and cycads and named his home-based nursery the Hidden Garden.

Neighbors often trotted down his remote side street, too, on horseback.

These days, he says, mostly



MARIANNE ARMISHAW/FOR THE HERALD

AT HOME: Chery Gillies, owner of Emerald Acres, shares a moment with Stormy, one of 31 horses at the stable.

cars gallop by — to the neighborhood schools weekday mornings, to the churches on Sundays.

Over the years Horse Country, a part of Kendall set aside for homes and farms, has been a magnet for private schools and sanctuaries searching for precious land. More than 20 are stacked inside the neighborhood's two square miles.

•TURN TO NEIGHBORHOOD, 2B



MARIANNE ARMISHAW/FOR THE HERALD

A STABLE LIFE: Horses frolic in the fields of Emerald Acres in Horse Country in Southwest Miami-Dade County. Residents complain that the neighborhood's expanding churches and schools are ruining the area's rural character.

Growth has factions clashing

• NEIGHBORHOOD, FROM 1B

But as Miami-Dade's population has grown, they too have wanted to expand to accommodate their flocks — which ruffles neighbors trying to maintain their slice of quiet.

"There are churches, schools — and churches with schools — that are busting at the seams because they started on too small of a property," Schaff said. "And they all want to expand."

Month after month, groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ Almighty approach the West Kendall Community Council for permission to grow — and face off with a packed room of homeowners.

Jesus Christ Almighty, which must hold five Sunday services to accommodate its 500 parishioners, got so desperate it even offered to erect a statue of a horse to please the locals.

"We offered to build a community center, to build a horse trail in the back of our

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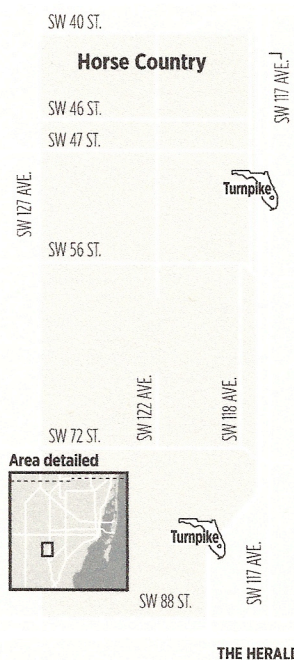
— MANNY GOMEZ, head of the Bird Kendall Homeowners Association

property," the Rev. Yader Simpson said.

The church first settled in the area in the early 1990s, Simpson said, because the land was affordable, yet well-located near homes of thousands of would-be parishioners.

His church was lucky. The council approved its expansion. But in a rare move, Miami-Dade County Zoning Director Diane O'Quinn Williams appealed the decision to the County Commission. She said it was unfair to approve the expansion when the center next door was turned down months earlier for trying to top off their building with another story.

Also, because of the area's zoning — it's been zoned as



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The council has considered 15 similar requests since 1998, and neighbors have grown used to fighting them.

They first took on a shopping center in 1975, proposed for Southwest 43rd Street and 127th Avenue — and won.

They still pride themselves on the stables clustered in Horse Country, like the Emerald Acres farm, and the Hacienda Guadalupe, home to world champion Paso Fino horses.

Homeowners say they won't stop fighting to protect the nature of their neighborhood.

"We just want to control the growth there, and we are willing to fight," Manny Gomez, who heads the Bird Kendall Homeowners Association, said. "This is a unique area and it would be a shame to lose it."

Chery Gillies, owner of Emerald Acres and a resident for more than 40 years, agreed.

"Even New York has its Central Park," she said.

agricultural land for at least six decades — the church would have to show its expansion is necessary to support that use. It didn't, the county's appeal said.