

BUILDING COMMUNITY ONE HOME AT A TIME

Families find a neighborhood that fits at Coolman Communities' Essex Park

by Julia Versau
Special to the Times

Few builder-developers can put together a neighborhood the way Coolman Communities, Inc. does. This Porter County company has constructed some of the most enduring, picturesque, and livable communities - take the Village at Aberdeen, for instance, or Heritage Valley - and houses that retain long-term value in the marketplace.

That's why prospective homebuyers will want to visit one of Coolman Communities' latest neighborhoods: Essex Park. A Spring Fest celebration will welcome families who want to tour Essex Park and visit model homes this weekend and next. Event hours are 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday. The model home and office is also open from 1 to 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday (closed Fridays).

Essex Park is a family-focused kind of place. Nestled minutes from downtown Valparaiso off State Road 2, Essex Park was named for the U.S.S. Essex, the flagship of Commodore David Porter. Porter, hero of the War of 1812's "Battle of Valparaiso" off the coast of Chile, has a name that lives on in Porter County - and now a neighborhood that pays homage to history. All of the streets in Essex Park derive their names from the various villages and towns in Essex County, Massachusetts where the mighty ship was built.

Visitors will learn the history - but instinctively love the neighborhood. Pretty houses are clustered on a 40-acre site designed to maximize open space, including enlarged backyard play spaces for children the builder calls "rambles." Streets gently wind and curve to slow traffic and up the safety net for youngsters. A 75-foot greenbelt separates Essex Park from its closest residential neighbor (Heritage Valley) and a 90-acre wetland (harboring a host of native flora and fauna) is the community's own wildlife preserve. There's a skating pond, a soccer field, and an abundance of pocket parks.

The homes are built to be big enough for growing families, but affordable enough that the market is open to a broad range of homebuyers. That's a Coolman Communities specialty: designing great-looking homes with the amenities families want without an impossible price tag. Home and lot packages start at \$149,900. One way the builder achieves this is by working with a core group of 12 home plans with various elevations and finishing options. This accomplishes two things. First, the builder can streamline construction on plans it knows so well (hence the affordability). Secondly, because the homeowner chooses the elevation, finish colors, and detailing, all the houses have a unique look and express the personalities of their owners.

"We let the customer make as many of the selections as possible," explained Carol Carden, the Chief Operating Officer with Coolman Communities, Inc. "Personalization is a big deal to us - we want our customers to feel their homes are singular in design, and unique to their own families."

Coolman Communities, Inc. has other design guidelines at Essex Park that make it a great place for families - and frankly, any homebuyer. Ninety percent of Essex Park homesites back up to green space. Street trees are cultivated to enclose streets, and sidewalks throughout the neighborhood make walks (from stroller age to cane age) enjoyable. Generous garages pulled to

the sides of the homes allow more room for family and friends to park on visits - and also create elevations that underscore the idea of houses built for people, not for cars.

The atmosphere at Essex Park is neighborly. This is a community where people look out for one another, where they join together to throw an all-neighborhood rummage sale, where seasoned and novice gardeners work hand-in-hand in Essex Park's own Garden Club. The ample front porches Coolman Communities likes to build come in handy in a neighborhood becoming known for its community spirit.

The houses are built to strict guidelines. Not only are the homes built to be functional and durable, but also to maximize energy efficiency. Every home constructed by Coolman Communities complies with the U.S. Department of Energy's "Energy Star" program which reduces utility bills, provides healthier indoor air, lowers maintenance costs, provides a more comfortable and quieter home, helps protect the environment, and provides access to preferred financing programs.

Too much information to take in? Probably not for homebuyers, who have many questions and concerns when considering the purchase of a new residence. That's why Coolman Communities, Inc. has produced a series of detailed flyers and placed them in a special "information tower" in its model home. Carden says the tower is a hit with visitors, who say they appreciate Coolman Communities' focus on helping buyers understand every element of the home design and building process, the neighborhood, and more.

"People who come here say they get all their questions answered - and some they didn't even know they had," Carden noted. "We make it our goal to ensure families who visit Essex Park know everything about how we build and what we can do to accommodate their needs."

Becoming partners with families so that the homes and neighborhood work for real people is important to Coolman Communities, Inc.

"Happy families who love their homes and community are our best messengers," Carden explained. "A great home in a fantastic neighborhood is the American Dream. Our whole mission is to make that dream a reality for as many families as possible."

Visitors will see that great things are possible in brand new communities. There is a spirit of openness and friendliness at Essex Park, fed by both the design of the individual homes and the environmentally sensitive plan for the neighborhood as a whole. At Essex Park, homes fit into a larger context - that other element of the American Dream - the desire to live in community.

IF YOU GO

Essex Park is celebrating the season with Spring Fest from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday. Spring Fest continues next weekend on April 24 and 25. During the week, the model home and office is open from 1 to 5 p.m. (closed Fridays). To get to Essex Park, follow State Road 2 south (about 2 miles from downtown Valparaiso). For more information, call Coolman Communities, Inc. at (219) 464-8055 or visit www.coolmanbuilt.com.

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