

ESSEX PARK

When Bob Coolman gets frustrated, young homebuyers benefit

by Julia Versau

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Bob Coolman gets frustrated. The son of a builder, a highly successful builder in his own right, and the president of Coolman Communities, Inc., he could rest on his laurels if he was that kind of guy. But fortunately for Porter County, Coolman can't help but wrap his mind around the issues involved in building homes. Frustration, as those who know him can attest, is Coolman's first step on the way to a solution.

It happened when Coolman was building rather upscale residences for a fairly select clientele, in neighborhoods where the price points for brand new homes were considerably above what so many first-time buyers could touch. He knew there had to be a way to transfer the same high quality building methodology to a more affordable product. Coolman wrestled with a knotty problem. What would it take to construct top-notch homes with the kind of square footage growing families need - at costs that would make it do-able for both the builder and the customers?

Of course, it took a while to get there. Coolman first had to find land that was itself in the affordable range, and then to devise building plans and specifications that maximized benefit to the customer and minimized extraneous expenses. And because Coolman is so very interested in the nature of community itself - how it develops and what it needs to flourish - there had to be some goodies, too.

The answer was Essex Park. This community on Valparaiso's southeast side, moments from downtown off State Road 2 and just north of Aberdeen, will be home to a hundred or more families. Coolman figured out how to build really good houses less expensively, which involved - among other things - working from a book of established plans and staying committed to the reduction of construction complexity.

Coolman examined every little angle when it came to giving young families more square footage for their hard-earned dollars. Two-story homes, for instance, could provide per foot space at a lower cost than comparable one-story houses. In other words, "going up" kept roof and foundation costs stable (and more easily centralized mechanical systems), while getting the same square footage in a sprawling ranch plan made prices escalate. That's one reason the company offers bonus space in every Essex Park home it builds, over the garage using square footage that was "paid for" when the roof and foundation went in. It's the extra bedroom a family could use, or dearily welcome storage space.

Coolman and his committed staff wrestled every issue: how to design the space for the way families live, how to maximize the square footage while stabilizing costs, how to use set house drawings yet give each family's home individual flair, how to increase energy efficiency, and how to decrease maintenance headaches.

And because this is Coolman Communities, Inc., Bob Coolman got his goodies. Not only does he believe today that Essex Park provides as much quality housing dollar for dollar as can be found anywhere. He also trusts that the amenities his company packed into the community - rambles where children can play, curving streets for greater safety, walking trails, a skating pond, a soccer field, pocket parks, and a 75-foot greenbelt between Essex Park and its nearest neighbor - represent real value to young families.

Go figure: Coolman is still frustrated. He has his perfectly conceived community, but it's not always easy to convince consumers who have been trained to seek the biggest house on the biggest lot on a plot of land as far from others as possible. And, unfortunately, to distrust what sounds ideal.

"You know, articulating what it is we offer is now harder than building the homes," Coolman confessed. "I don't know if people believe how much quality they can get at starting prices of \$149,000 for the house and the lot."

That's a knotty problem indeed, trying to sell something that sounds too good to be true but isn't. In an economy scarred by scandals and scams and a culture barred from so blatant a neighborliness as Essex Park offers, it can be hard to convince some people there's still a rainbow and not just a digital creation.

The customers who do live at Essex Park, and in other Coolman communities, help spread the word. They also have rated the company as tops in customer service - not just compared to firms in the local marketplace, but to residential building companies from throughout the U.S.

That makes Coolman a little less frustrated, and a little more hopeful. But nobody wants Bob Coolman to get too happy. Then he might stop finding solutions to all those issues that keep families from owning their own new homes.

IF YOU GO

Essex Park will be open for visitor tours from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday. Staffers will be happy to show several model homes and provide a wealth of information about how Coolman Communities, Inc. builds homes and communities, the residential construction process, special warranties, and more. For instance, Coolman Communities, Inc. pledges to build each house according to an agreed upon deadline or the company pays a penalty. During the week, the model home/office (219-464-7510) 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). Additional details can also be found at www.coolmanbuilt.com.

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