



Lexington Homes back working at Rob Roy

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When Jeff Benach's father, Ron, opened the massive Rob Roy Country Club Village townhouse and duplex community in Prospect Heights in the early 1980s, Jeff was a very young man, barely out of college.

Lexington Homes, the company the elder Benach founded, completed the residential portion of Rob Roy, but never developed two parcels fronting Euclid Avenue, reserving them for future commercial development, Jeff Benach said.

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The Benachs were so sure of the two sites' future commercial potential that they held on to them personally, not including them in the package when Lexington Homes was sold to Westinghouse in 1989.

When Ron Benach opened his next home-building company, Concord Homes, the new company tapped the larger of the two parcels to build the Country Club Villas at Rob Roy Village, a small subdivision of higher density townhouses. But the smaller open parcel continued to sit, Benach said, waiting for the right moment to put a commercial development there.

Time passed; Concord Homes was sold to Lennar in 2002 and Jeff even worked for that huge national firm for four years before leaving it in 2006 to help his father and partners, Wayne Moretti and Max Plzak, start a new home-building company, once again using that venerable Lexington name.

Since then the company has built 56 units at Willow Place in Wheeling and 144 townhouses in Des Plaines at Lexington Park. It has redeveloped three old industrial warehouse parcels in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood, replacing them with townhouses and single-family homes.

And the Benachs have decided the time is right to return to Prospect Heights and develop that long vacant remaining Rob Roy parcel. Commercial development is still not an option, so they are instead building Lexington Village at Rob Roy — a community of 15 townhouses using the same floor plans as those at Lexington Park in Des Plaines, but different exteriors and less of an urban land plan than in the neighboring community.

"We knew that it would create a buzz when we announced plans to build at Rob Roy again and it has. The timing is good. We have only been open a month and already have four sales," Benach said.

The details:

All of the new townhouses at Lexington Village at Rob Roy feature two-car garages with quite a bit of brick on the exteriors. They range in size from 1,605 to 1,915 square feet and are priced between \$262,000 and \$299,000. Models can be viewed at Lexington Park in Des Plaines.

Jeff Benach recently sat down to talk about the new development.

What is your business philosophy?

"Know who your buyer is and design something that 100 percent meets their vision, not yours — then deliver even more — and you will always succeed.

"You need to pay attention to who is buying what and know important details like where they live now, what their current housing situation is, whether they are transit-oriented, what their price point is and what pace the homes are selling. That is how you will know how deep a given market is."

Who are your buyers?

"In Des Plaines and Prospect Heights, our buyers are first- and second-time buyers. Those who are moving up are moving from condominiums and most of those buying in Des Plaines are coming from Chicago."

In the Bridgeport communities, buyers are mostly young families who have chosen to raise their children in the city. They like the unusually large city lots there and are drawn by the great Chicago public, Catholic and magnet schools in the area, he said.

What is the best part of the business?

"It is always challenging and I must have a mental challenge to be happy. I also enjoy seeing empty property, imagining something being built there and knowing that it will still be there long after I am gone. Putting all of the necessary ducks in order along the way in order to make it happen is also fun."

What are the biggest changes you have seen in the building business?

"The length of time that people are planning to stay in their homes is increasing again. For awhile there, it was only a few years before they were planning to trade up.

"Buyers expectations for their homes' amenities are also increasing, even though the home sizes are getting smaller. The national economics have made price very important."

That is why you see national homebuilders offering 1,500-square-foot townhouses, Benach said. That is the only way they can meet the target buyers' price requirements and still make enough of a profit to operate.

"Even if the land was free, there are still inherent building costs and the builder must make a profit."

The other change he has noticed are the number of families with children now moving into townhouses, making schools as important to townhouse buyers as they are to single-family home buyers.

What are your future plans for Lexington Homes?

While Lexington's core business is infill residential construction, it looks at any and all opportunities, Benach said. Its sister company, First American Properties, handles commercial development, as well as rentals in a 12-story building at 188 W. Randolph St., Chicago, it owns.

Lexington Homes has also just opened a custom home community in Kildeer called Woodleaf at the Sanctuary Club. The 26-lot subdivision is located next to the Kemper Lakes Golf Course and is served by Lake Michigan water and city sewers. Lots of one-third to one-half acre are being sold for prices ranging from the mid-\$200,000s to the mid-\$300,000s. However, those opting to have Lexington build one of its new custom "portfolio homes" there will receive a discount on the lot, Benach said.

Two immediate delivery spec homes of 3,400 and 4,200 square feet, respectively, are under construction at Woodleaf at the Sanctuary Club.

For more information about Lexington Homes, visit www.lexingtonchicago.com.

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