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Friday, October 31, 2008

Many customers want more in their retirement homes

By Lorraine Halsted
The Winchester Star

Double Tollgate — Retirees have been thinking outside the box in recent years when they consider finding a place to live out the rest of their lives.

Florida has always been a popular choice for retirees in the northern states who want to escape the harsh winters. Now many are looking for a place somewhere in between, where the weather is relatively mild, but not so far away from family and friends.

"They found that the separation was not what they were seeking," said Elliot Totah, executive vice president for the Oxbridge Group in Rockville Md., the developer for Shenandoah at Lake Frederick, an active adult community off U.S. 522.

The housing industry calls them "half-backs," Totah said — retirees who moved to Florida but came "halfway back," settling in the Carolinas or Virginia to be closer to their children and grandchildren and their former hometowns.

Now that term also extends to those who choose a place halfway between the North and the South.

"To be closer to family is very important to them,"

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Totah said.

It also seems they are willing to give up the hot Florida sun for the mixed bag of weather in the Mid-Atlantic states.

Totah said Oxbridge targeted Winchester in particular because of its location along major thoroughfares such as Interstates 81 and 66, just below the Mason-Dixon Line, making it the perfect gateway between the North and the South.

Capitalizing on this group of active adults over age 55, developers throughout the Shenandoah Valley are building communities tailored to their needs.

In the Oxford Group’s research, the highest demand among homeowners in active adult communities was the availability of social and recreational opportunities.

“The lifestyle is such a huge component,” said Allen Rector, director of the active adult division for Winchester Homes, the company building houses for Shenandoah at Lake Frederick. “They want lots of opportunities for socializing and recreation.”

It’s no mistake, he said, that the 942-acre development — which will include 2,200 homes when it’s completely built out in the next 10 to 12 years — has a clubhouse with space for large gatherings, walking trails, and access to a 120-acre lake.

In addition, the development has a full-time activities director who schedules trips and other events off- and on-site.

“They’re very active,” Jerry Scripture, developer for Heritage Estates in Harrisonburg, said of the residents who live in the active adult community planned for 41 homes. “They want to be on the golf course, and they want to be playing tennis.”

Oddly enough, residents of active adult communities don’t necessarily demand smaller homes. Shenandoah at Lake Frederick has homes that range, on average, from 1,800 to 2,500 square feet, with prices starting at \$349,000.

Rector said residents in active adult communities don’t want to downsize too much because they still want room for overnight guests, in case children or grandchildren come to visit. They also want space for large social gatherings.

“They definitely like to entertain, a lot more than people realize,” he said.

And unlike young families who rarely use their formal dining rooms, Rector said a large dining room is typically on the list of “must-haves” for residents moving into Shenandoah. “It’s amazing because

typically you don't see the dining room being used a lot, but this group wanted a place for big gatherings and families."

Some residents also finish bonus space and basements for home offices and game rooms, Rector said. "Some are optioning out to 5,000 square feet."

Scripture said many residents at Heritage Estates select the larger space. Homes in the subdivision range from 1,630 square feet to 4,500 square feet, with prices starting at \$334,000.

Residents also don't skimp on quality, he said. They think through their choices on optional decorative touches such as countertops and molding, among other features, and often work closely with the development's interior design service.

"When people make a decision to buy into this community, they're thinking: 'This is probably the last house I'm going to buy,'" he said. "So they're interested in quality and lots of detail."

Vaughn T. Foura, president of OakCrest Builders in Winchester, said his company decided to build bigger homes in Harvest Ridge after developing four other active adult communities in the city and another in Harrisonburg with duplexes and smaller single-level homes, most of which were about 1,500 square feet.

"Harvest Ridge is a little different because we were trying to hit a different population," he said.

OakCrest was trying to target the empty-nesters between 55 and 65, after conducting focus groups and finding a preference for bigger homes in that age range.

But the homes also attracted older residents.

"We really missed the mark," Foura said of the development planned for 82 homes — with about 30 built and occupied. "The average age right now is about 70."

Homes in Harvest Ridge range from about 1,800 to 3,000 square feet.

Even though they want the extra space, Foura said, designs that allow for first-floor living are also in demand among active adults.

Developers of all three communities say they offer "universal design" features, options that residents can choose, such as wide hallways and door entrances, lowered countertops, and the absence of outside steps to accommodate those who are active but may be slowing down or living with a disability.

Foura said residents don't necessarily choose one-

story homes, but they do prefer the master bedroom on the first floor so that use of the second floor is optional.

"What we've done in Harvest Ridge is 1 1/2 stories," he said. Extra bedrooms and bathrooms are in an upstairs loft.

So, should residents encounter problems navigating steps as they age, they still have everything they need on the first floor.

Foura said residents can also select zoned heating, so they can close off the upstairs if they are not using the space.

Another a standard service — for about \$100 a month in all three developments — is grounds maintenance managed by their respective Home Owners Associations.

That service covers mowing lawns, snow-clearing, and general maintenance of streets and driveways.—

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