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Building A Home, From Dirt To Door

Published on Friday November 09, 2012

New-home construction employs thousands and creates a thriving industry in the GTA. Here's what it takes to build one

Boaz Feiner: low-rise

Boaz Feiner, president of Geranium Homes, a company that has built more than 7,000 houses over the past 35 years, says it's a "mass co-ordination effort" to build a home. According to the 2012 BILD Home Builder of the Year, typically around 200 people work on building a single home.

Find a site

Given the scarcity of developable land in the GTA, it's becoming increasingly difficult to find sites, says Feiner. "Low-rise builders are starting to look farther afield than they would have historically looked." But location remains a key consideration when looking for good-quality sites — those that are close to transportation, shopping and other amenities.

Prep work

Once a suitable site is found, the real groundwork begins. "We'll spend many months working on our contracts, scopes, research and development, getting all the approvals," Feiner explains. "We coordinate efforts, so that when we finally put the shovel in the ground, it's like pushing the Go button."

Tie it in

If the new home is a greenfield development — a planned community on previously undeveloped land — the builder must tie in the subdivision with municipal services such as sewer, water and electricity, and also oversee the creation of new roadways, streetscaping and parks. Developers typically cover the up-front costs of doing the preliminary servicing work on pioneer sites. "We come up with the money and get paid back a portion of that over time, as we and other builders start connecting to the services," says Feiner.

Big dig

For high-volume home builders like Geranium, the construction process is streamlined and efficient. "When we go into the ground, we've already determined any issues we might face and we come up with a strategy to resolve them," Feiner says. "So when we start, it goes quickly. From excavation to foundation to framing to the roof — all of it has been engineered and approved."

Feiner is a fan of prefabricated construction elements, such as factory-made wall panels, flooring and roofing systems. Prefabricated components make the construction process more efficient and environmentally friendly, he notes, ensuring quality control that results in a better-built home.

Mass co-ordination

It takes between 30 and 34 weeks to build one of Geranium's 40-foot homes, from excavation through to construction completion. All in all, more than 100 companies are involved in putting together a home, Feiner estimates, from consultants for architecture, engineering and approvals, to the trades doing the construction, from the concrete pourers, to plumbing, heating and electrical contractors.

Alan Vihant: high-rise

As senior vice president of high-rise development for Great Gulf Homes, Alan Vihant estimates that he's helped build thousands of homes within 40 high-rise developments during his career.

The right site

Being in a "hot" neighbourhood, with restaurants and walkability, is great, but developers willing to pioneer yet-undiscovered locales can benefit from lower land costs, which translates into more affordable condos. "We're always looking at locations where we can get a pricing advantage," says Vihant.

Community benefits

Developers can apply to rezone land. In Toronto, communities can receive benefits like libraries, recreation centres and streetscape improvements in exchange for increases to height and density.

As an example, at Pace, Great Gulf's project at Dundas and Jarvis, Vihant notes that the builder has devoted an entire floor of units as live-work studios for use by the non-profit organization Artscape.

Feedback/consultation

Once the developer and its engineering and design teams come up with preliminary plans for the condo, the builder will meet with area councillors and planning staff to get feedback. They typically meet with community members as well. "You have a dialogue with key stakeholders to figure out what is acceptable about the project," Vihant explains. And, of course, "sometimes you just can't make everyone happy," he says.

On sale

Some builders will bring a project to market even before rezoning is in place or final design details are worked out. Their urgency is understandable: banks usually require that up to 70 per cent of a project be sold before they'll finance its construction. "The way we sell projects is changing; the time frame is getting longer," says Vihant, noting that new home buyers are a mix of investors and end-users.

Dig in

Of all stages of construction, digging takes the longest. "The hardest part is getting down and back up again to grade level," says Vihant. He points out that it took a



It can take up to 500 construction workers to build a high-rise condo, says Alan Vihant.

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whole year to get to the bottom of the six-level pit for One Bloor — a 75-storey project at Yonge and Bloor — and it will probably take his company “just shy of a year to come back out of the ground.”

But once the podium, or base, of a condo is built, the pace of construction picks up considerably. “On a typical condo project, you can go up a floor a week,” says Vihant. He estimates that at least 400 to 500 people are involved in the construction of a condo, including consultants, construction trades and suppliers delivering materials to the site.