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# *Answering the question ‘What do buyers want?’*

By LUCY CLARK



*Photographs by Stephen Lakatos*

Liz Verna of Verna Properties in Wallingford asked prospective buyers what they wanted in a new home.



As long-time respected builders, Liz Verna and Robert Wiedenmann Jr. figured they pretty much knew what customers wanted. But with the economy in the doldrums they decided to take a different approach when they joined forces to start construction on The Willows, a 65-house subdivision on North Farms Road in their hometown of Wallingford.

Last December, before breaking ground on the development, they had Joanne Carroll, a marketing consultant who is the publisher of Connecticut Builder magazine, conduct a focus group to see what 40 potential homebuyers wanted in a house.

The potential buyers – young couples, families and empty nesters – helped the builders identify the Top 10 features they wanted. Those findings – from the focus group and a subsequent follow-up survey – were forwarded to the builder’s architect, Jim Wentling, to incorporate into the design of the houses.

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Some of the findings from the focus group surprised the developers, who are building the first new single-family community in Wallingford since 1995.

“I wouldn’t start another project without doing another one,” said Verna, a principal of Verna Properties, a family-owned company in Wallingford. Verna and Wiedenmann, of Sunwood Development Corp., have formed VW Homes LLC to build the subdivision.

The developers knew that they had the perfect location: The Willows is located on a picturesque 45-acre former farm on North Farms Road, about a mile away from the historic center of Wallingford and close to Choate Rosemary Hall preparatory school.

The property also is easily accessible by I-91, which is a mile away, and other major highways. Twenty acres of the development are dedicated to open space, so almost every home will have views and direct access to undeveloped woodlands.

“We’re building an old-fashioned neighborhood with sidewalks, street trees, lantern lighting and open space,” Verna said. “We call it a new old-fashioned neighborhood.”

With prices starting at \$379,900 to \$559,900, the builders figure the traditional and craftsman-style homes will attract first-time buyers (it meets FHA guidelines) as well as “move-up” families and empty nesters interested in the ranch-style homes at The Willows.

Carroll, managing partner of JMC Resources, a marketing and public relations firm based in Guilford, has long been an advocate of focus groups to gauge the wants and needs of potential home buyers.”

“The biggest value of focus groups for builders is to find out what people want that isn’t available,” Carroll said. “Then you don’t have any competition – you’re providing something other builders are not.

“They also create buzz, they get people talking about your development,” she added.

In this economy, focus groups are especially important, Carroll said. “You want to build a product the consumer wants.” Carroll initially met with 40 potential buyers, most of them couples, representing a spectrum of buyers – first-timers, families and empty nesters.

Among the findings: People wanted smaller homes. So the builders designed 15 plans from 1,650 square feet to 3,000 square feet.

“People are going smaller,” Carroll said.

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**But they also wanted quality construction with touches such as crown molding and nine-foot ceilings on the first floor, she said.**

**They wanted vinyl siding for easy maintenance. But they also wanted a choice of trims on the outside of the house.**

**They wanted large “great rooms” – and, in many cases, no formal dining room. And they nixed two-story foyers which they regarded as a waste of space and too expensive to heat and cool. Instead, they wanted the extra space developed on the second floor.**

**The results of the survey can be seen in the layout of the development’s model home – one of 14 homes in colonial or craftsman-style that are offered by the developers.**

**Must Have Features: A ‘drop zone’ and lots of laundry space**

**In order of importance, here are some of the focus groups’ “must have features” that have been incorporated into the plans:**

**1. Vinyl siding. People want low maintenance, but they also wanted a choice of accents such as tapered columns, stone facades, shake roofs, clapboard and carriage-style garage doors.**

**A portico entry was important. “We thought a front porch would be big,” Verna said, but it was not as important as a covered entrance.**

**2. Flat nine-foot ceilings with molding and bead board. The flat ceilings were preferred over cathedral ceilings so the space could be used on the second floor for extra room.**

**“People didn’t want those volume ceilings – that was definitely a surprise,” Verna said.**

**3. Large family room/ great room that opens to a kitchen with granite countertops.**

**4. A kitchen island with bar stool seating and a breakfast room.**

**5. A master suite with a walk- in closet and master bath. “They didn’t care so much for a luxury master bath,” Carroll said. “I was amazed when I said ‘What about a separate shower and tub and they said ‘we don’t care about that.’”**

**6. Roomy 12-by-16- foot deck instead of the usual 10-by-10- foot deck.**

**7. A mud room – or drop zone. “All of the women said ‘we want the mudroom,’” Verna said. They also wanted a separate laundry room with plenty of storage and work space.**

**8. A flex- room on the first floor that could be used as a playroom or den.**

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**9. Kitchen pantry and hall coat closet.** “A lot of builders don’t put coat closets in the hall,” Carroll said.

**10. Gas heat and extra insulation for energy efficiency.** “There were certain things people said they would not compromise on. These included having both a breakfast bar in the kitchen and a separate eating space,” Carroll said.

They also wanted: “Storage, storage and more storage,” Verna said.

One of the more interesting findings had to do with empty nesters who were interested in buying a ranch. They wanted two bedrooms on the first floor – instead of the usual one. The second bedroom would be used as a den or a guest bedroom.

The breakfast bar is the new dining room

They also didn’t want a ranch that looked like a ranch, “they wanted it to look like it was two stories,” Verna said. The builders solved this by designing a cape-like second floor.

Not so important: A formal dining room.

That didn’t surprise Carroll. “People are informal.... That’s why they wanted the breakfast area, because it’s really their new dining room.”

“People are thinking things out lifestyle- wise,” Carroll said. “If you’re going to buy a new house you might as well have it so it will make living easier.”

The focus group also made it clear that they wanted many of these things standard in the house – not as upgrades.

“It’s like a Lexus – you can’t buy a Lexus without leather seats, you get the whole package,” Verna said.

The builders also offer 300 upgrades

The focus group said that the Internet plays a key role in their search for a new home. The Willows website, <http://www.thewillowsct.com/> has interactive views of the houses.

The builders are also helping to make it easier for people interested in “moving up” to the development by helping them sell their houses. In a program called “Smart Moves,” they recommend financiers, consult with homeowners on pricing, and give curb appeal and staging suggestions.

“We want to make it as easy as we can,” Weidemann said.

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