

HOME AWAY

Keeping an Eye on a New Home



Illustration by Nancy Doniger

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Most clients on the roster of Everest Construction have one thing in common: They live hundreds of miles away, or even farther, from the homes they are having built at the Tamarack Resort, a new ski and golf community in Donnelly, Idaho, 95 miles north of Boise.

Working with so many second-home buyers has led Everest to beef up its Internet communications, said David Pascua, who handles sales and marketing for the company. It has a password-protected Web page for each of the 20 or so home buyers it works with annually, complete with a construction timeline and photos that show the building progress.

“Every single day it is updated,” Mr. Pascua said. “And we follow up with owners over weekly phone calls.”

Building a house is a major project however you slice it, but when it’s a vacation home being supervised from several states away, it can be

even more difficult. The good news is that construction companies and developers like Everest are both streamlining the building process and posting more of the design decisions online.

Builders and contractors are keeping owners updated through personalized Web sites or e-mail messages filled with digital attachments.

Domenick Galluzzo built a 4,600-square-foot house in The Porches, a community in Steamboat Springs, Colo., two years ago. During the periods when he wasn't able to be there, he was kept up to date on the 11-month-long construction project at his home in Fairfield, Conn., though digital photos and phone calls with the builder, as well as faxes from the interior designer.

"They took photos and e-mailed them every week that showed the progress inside and out," Mr. Galluzzo said. "The communication was good. If I called them, they called me back."

Easy communication with the builder is one key to making the construction process run smoothly. But even with technology, nothing can replace a good set of eyes on the ground. Amy Johnston, a construction manager in Burlington, Vt., recommends that second-home owners unable to make regular visits to the construction site hire an overseer who can keep watch on the project and act as an owners' liaison.

"For a long-distance construction project," Ms. Johnston said, "a person on site for the homeowner is essential." This person, she said, can be the buyer's architect or a construction manager; a good candidate would be a retired site supervisor for a construction company. Local building inspectors or even property appraisers are likely to be able to refer you to someone who can take on this job.

Visiting the home site oneself is, of course, also essential. "Pick milestones," Ms. Johnston said. "It's good to see the foundation and the house after it has been framed but before it is closed up."

Homeowners might also want to visit when the land is being prepared and surveyed, to approve the removal of any trees.

Glenn Thompson checked up on the construction of his 1,500-square-foot one-bedroom house in Burnsville, N.C., about once a month throughout the seven-month project, though he admits that the regular photographs and phone calls with the builder kept him well updated. “You could be as involved as you wanted to,” said Mr. Thompson, who lives in Sarasota, Fla.

He simplified the construction process by opting for an all-in-one package, which included the mountain side lot and the home for \$490,000. Any problems in the construction process that resulted in increased costs, he said, were absorbed by the builder. “We bought it off a line sketch drawing,” he said. “This model had never been built.”

During construction, when a chimney had to be added to the house (it turned out that the original plan for a ventless fireplace wouldn’t suffice), Mr. Thompson said his costs didn’t increase at all.

Greg Perlman, the developer at Montesorro, a new second-home community in the desert near San Diego, gives home site buyers two options: either hire the builder of their choice, who will build the custom home he proposes, or choose from ready-made plans. So far the development has three models on offer; although the homeowners’ choice of finishes will be limited, Mr. Perlman said, keeping those choices high end makes sense for his target market. For the kinds of homes in the community, he explained, there is no reason to offer tile countertops and cheaper appliances when granite finishes and Sub-Zero appliances are most likely going to be their choices, he said.

Reynolds Construction, a builder at Reynolds Plantation, a golf community in Lake Oconee, Ga., says it is streamlining the building process for home site buyers this year by expanding its online services. This summer it will roll out a Web site that brings designing a home closer to the experience of online shopping. The site will

present a narrowed-down selection of cabinets, floors, door handles, and sink fixtures from which owners can make their choices.

“Basically they will e-mail us a shopping cart,” said Hal Walker, the director of construction for Reynolds. The next step, he explained, is an in-person meeting, so that the owner can see all the selections before the order is placed.

But even with the most comprehensive Web sites and a constant stream of digital photos, nothing can quite replace a firsthand visit. After all, a homeowner can still walk into the house at any stage in the process and decide to make a change. “They might come in and say, ‘I don’t like that wall there, push it back,’ ” Mr. Pascua said. “And we’ll do it.”