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Boomers are driving accessibility in housing



When Steve and Debby Jacobs wanted to downsize their home, they looked at many communities before settling on Fisher Farm in Winfield. They chose to build a home with a first-floor master suite and added a screened porch option as well. (John Starks / Staff Photographer)

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By Jean Murphy
Daily Herald Correspondent

Posted
7/27/2019 7:00 AM

Trekking up a flight of stairs several times each day is becoming a chore for more and more baby boomers who have suffered sports or military-related injuries -- or just mishaps of one kind or another -- over the years. Illnesses of various types can also make the daily trek difficult.

Consequently, many are now seeking one-level living or at least a home with the master bedroom on the main floor.

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First-floor master

Steve and Debby Jacobs moved into a new ranch home at Fisher Farm, an Airhart Construction community in Winfield, nearly two years ago. They now have a three-bedroom ranch overlooking a pond. They use one of the bedrooms as an office and love the screened porch they added as an option.

"We wanted to downsize to a ranch with a finished basement because we were tired of doing the stairs all the time," Debby explained.

"Our previous home only had a half bath on the main floor so we started thinking about a move about five years before we actually did it," Steve added.

They checked out communities of all kinds in the surrounding suburbs but they all had their limitations, according to the Jacobs. "And we were both teachers who enjoy being around kids. So we didn't really want an age-restricted community," he continued.

They stayed away from existing ranches built during the 1950s and 1960s because they didn't want to take on a huge renovation project and didn't want to maintain the large parcels of land on which many of them sit.

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At their Fisher Farm home, the Jacobs like the fact that all outdoor maintenance is handled by the homeowners' association and also that the community features homes of all sizes and descriptions, not just ranches. Debby didn't want to move to a "cookie cutter" community where all the homes looked alike.

"We briefly considered adding an elevator to our previous home, but there was just no obvious place to put one," Steve explained.

"And we didn't need so much space anymore," Debby continued.

"We are really glad we made the move. We are very happy at Fisher Farm," he added.

Flex spaces

Court Airhart, president of Warrenton-based Airhart Construction, said that they are seeing many baby boomers who are re-evaluating the spaces they need and are opting to downsize by losing bedrooms. Instead, they are opting for multiuse rooms like dens or offices with room for a wall bed or a sleeper couch or even large air mattress when guests spend the night.

Some are forgoing a second floor entirely, while others are choosing a first-floor master suite and are placing their guest bedrooms on the second floor, Airhart said.

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"That way they can do their day-to-day living on the main level and only go upstairs to prepare for and clean up after guests," he explained.

Flexible spaces that can meet a number of needs are also quite popular in all plans -- spaces that can function as part of the dining space one day and as part of the family room another day.

Airhart is currently building communities in Wheaton, Warrenton and Winfield and they have an architect on staff who can customize plans to meet buyers' requests.

While 75 percent of their ranch-purchasers are empty nesters, Airhart said, they have also had some millennials who have been interested in the one-floor plans.

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Ranch homes

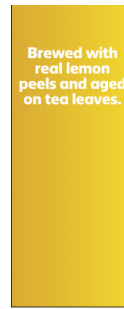
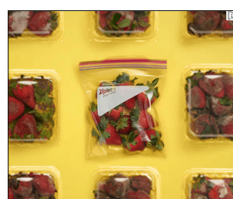
KLM Builders of Richmond, Illinois, is a prolific ranch homebuilder. Ninety percent of the homes they build are ranches and they offer 20 different ranch home models, according to Kim Meier, president.

KLM currently has six ranch models available for touring each weekend throughout their communities located in Richmond, Lake Villa, Ringwood, Johnsburg and Spring Grove (all in Illinois) and in Twin Lakes, Wisconsin. KLM is also planning to start a small community soon in Cary and is also willing to build homes on remote lots that buyers own or that KLM helps them find.

"We build ranch homes of every type, ranging in size from 1,200 to 3,000 square feet on a buyer's lot or on our lot, anywhere from southern Wisconsin to the suburbs north of O'Hare," Meier stated. "They all include full basements, granite or quartz countertops, garages that hold two, three or four cars and usually sit on a large lot. We offer a wide variety of homes and are also willing to customize."

"Ninety-nine percent of our customers want ranches because they don't want to have to climb stairs to clean more rooms. We are even getting young couples looking for ranches with open floor plans and high ceilings now that we are able to construct them to be energy-efficient," he explained.

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In addition, KLM offers three or four exterior elevations for each floor plan so that people can get a home made of brick, stone or frame done in a variety of looks including Craftsman and even a modern farmhouse.

"The popularity of ranch homes has accelerated in the last few years," Meier added. "We are in the heat of it now and no one does a ranch like we do. We have buyers coming from as far away as Naperville, Batavia and Villa Park because they are ready to retire."

How about an elevator?

Chicago-based Lexington Homes cares for baby boomer buyers by offering first floor master suites and, in one community, optional elevators.

Jeff Benach, president, makes the argument that ranches demand larger home sites which then need to be maintained and often need to be constructed on sites which are more rural and further away from friends and family. He prefers to construct homes on closer-in sites.

Lexington Homes will soon begin building 28 single family homes at Parkside of Glenview near Willow and Landwehr roads.

It will be the first Lexington project that features first-floor master bedroom suites. They also plan to do something similar at another new community -- Concord Oaks in Palatine. In fact, plans at both call for first-floor master suites with large walk-in closets that open onto a first-floor laundry room for ease of laundering. These first-floor master suites include all of the features you'd find in their second-floor counterparts: spacious refuge, custom closets and attached baths with luxury finishes. And they come with an added amenity: convenience. There's no need to climb the stairs as homeowners have access to everything they need on one floor.

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In addition, Lexington Reserve in Oak Park offers 21 row houses with an option for an elevator in each.

Maintenance free

Meritus Homes, based in Riverwoods, is building two communities that are primarily composed of ranches -- The Enclave at Mill Creek in Addison, an age-targeted, maintenance-free community, and The Reserve in St. Charles, a semi-custom community located near downtown St. Charles.

The Enclave is a community of 87 single-family homes being constructed on an old par-3 golf course. It is drawing people in the 50 to 70 age range who are looking for maintenance-free ranch homes in the 1,600- to 2,100-square-foot range, with full basements, according to Jay Dulla, vice president.

Homes at The Enclave list for between \$395,000 and \$440,000.

"You can choose to add a second story to three of the five plans there, if you wish," he explained. "When we do that, we put the master bedroom on the first floor and secondary bedrooms on the second floor and it generally costs \$50,000 extra to do."

The Reserve in St. Charles offers two ranch plans of 2,500 and 2,650 square feet. They feature 10-foot ceilings, eight-foot doors, open floor plans, covered patios and granite countertops and start at \$525,000 and \$625,000, sitting on one-third acre lots.

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"The Reserve is not a 55-plus community, but anyone can purchase there. We have some homes there that are 100 percent ready to purchase if someone is in a hurry," Dulla said. "Buyers should remember that ranch homes generally cost 20 to 25 percent more than a two-story home of a comparable size because they need bigger foundations and bigger roofs and that drives up all the costs. That is why many builders choose not to build them."

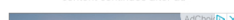
Open concept

M/I Homes, which is based in Columbus, Ohio, broke ground this spring on a new community of 54 low-maintenance single-family ranch-style homes in Kildeer. The 27-acre Wentworth community is located adjacent to the Kemper Lakes Golf Club.

M/I Homes has unveiled five new open-concept ranch home designs at Wentworth that will complement the community's tranquil setting. Floor plans range from 1,776 to 3,097 square feet and feature two to three bedrooms, two to three baths, an attached two-car garage and full basement. All homes in the community offer modern layouts with open kitchen and living area configurations, mudrooms, flex space that can be used as a den or bedroom, and a rear patio with the option for a screened porch. Additionally, every plan offers the option to add an upper-level bonus room, bedroom and bath. Base prices range from \$427,990 to \$480,990.

"For buyers looking for a new home and single-level living in Kildeer, Wentworth is truly a unique option," said Cheryl Bonk, vice president of sales and marketing for M/I Homes.

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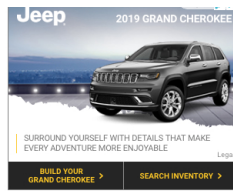
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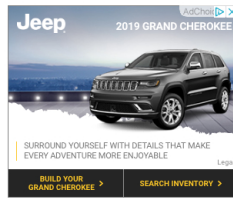
"Each floor plan includes the open living space today's homeowners prize, comfortable master suites and a number of extra touches buyers will appreciate. Many also offer the opportunity for front porches and covered patios."

Bonk added that the ranch plans at Wentworth are especially flexible due to the opportunity to add upper-level living space and bedrooms, perfect for college-age children and even visiting grandchildren.

Buyers can also personalize their home with morning rooms, butler's pantries or formal dining rooms. They can also opt for a luxury master bath with dual sinks and a separate tub and walk-in shower.

In addition, the lots at Wentworth are deep, but narrow, with beautiful rolling, wooded topography. Landscaping maintenance and snow removal will be handled by a homeowners' association.

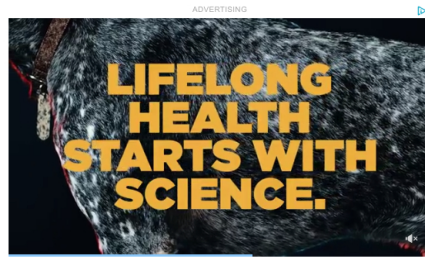
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This will be an empty-nester community, but not an age-restricted one. Residents will be able to choose either a golf or a social membership at Kemper Lakes, if they wish, Bonk stated.

M/I Homes also has a townhouse community called Brentwood available near downtown Barrington. The townhouses range in size between 1,782 and 2,098 square feet and several offer first floor master suites with a base price of \$379,900.

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And in Winfield, M/I Homes offers duplexes in the low \$400,000s at Timber Creek. The Danbury model features a first-floor master bedroom.

"We find that many empty nesters want to downsize nearby because they have family roots keeping them here. Many have a second home elsewhere, but they want a low-maintenance home in an infill location here that is close to friends and family," Bonk stated.

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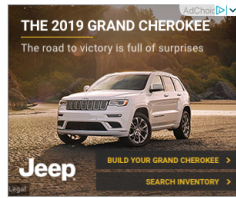
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