

Local News

Center of Attention Sales Centers Set the Stage for New Construction Homes

They say you never get a second chance to make a first impression. For new-home developers, that first impression to buyers comes at the sales center. A handful of savvy Chicago-area developers have taken their sales and information centers to the next level by incorporating high-tech tools to help buyers choose the right home. For example, at Settlers Ridge in Sugar Grove, Kimball Hill Homes has put all the community information right at buyers' fingertips - literally. The sales center features a touch-screen kiosk with everything from the history of the builder to floor plan options to the design of the neo-traditional master-planned community itself.

"Because of the scope of Settlers Ridge, bringing it to life for our potential buyers was a challenge," said Jack Wexelberg, regional president for Rolling Meadows-based Kimball Hill Homes. "And since this isn't a typical new-home community, we couldn't rely on typical sales center tools."

Plans for Settlers Ridge include approximately 2,400 homes on 1,300 acres, as well two schools, a town center, church, clubhouse, pool and numerous parks. Miles of walking and biking trails will run throughout as part of the pedestrian-oriented design. In addition to the touch-screen kiosk, Settlers Ridge offers 10 models for buyers to tour.

"Because of the variety of housing styles here, we needed to have quite a few models," said Wexelberg. "Models are extremely important because they let buyers see how a home really lives. It can be extremely difficult for someone to choose a home just off a floor plan. In fact, we have at least two models at every one of our Chicago-area communities."

Developer Bob Horner of Winthrop Properties agrees that it is often too difficult for people to select a home based on a floor plan alone and says that is especially true for downsizing buyers. At Winthrop Properties' newest high rise, Winthrop Club in Evanston, a variety of features in the sales center takes the guess work out of condo shopping.

"Often downsizers considering a condominium have never purchased new-construction, nor lived in a condo before, either. So we help them envision not only the space itself, but also the overall lifestyle," he said. "And when you throw the LEED-certified aspects of our building into the mix, it becomes a lot of information to process." He said the sales center features a virtual reality tour of the homes, common spaces and amenities, plus view shots from each unit on every floor. They also offer a flat-panel, interactive touch screen with information on LEED certification, as well as a podcast available for downloading.

Additionally, Winthrop Club's sales center has a decorated, two-bedroom model. Horner said buyers

appreciate all the tools available. "Most of our buyers are leaving the single-family homes they have lived in for most of their lives, so this is a really big step," he said. "With all we have in our sales center, they say they have plenty of information to make an educated choice."

Similarly, in downtown Chicago, The Clare at Water Tower's comprehensive Information and Design Center helps seniors select the right retirement residence. Located in the John Hancock Center just two blocks from The Clare's construction site at Rush and Pearson streets, the center's high-tech offerings and model vignette allow visitors to visualize their new homes in downtown Chicago's first high-rise continuing care retirement community (CCRC). The Information and Design Center showcases The Clare's luxury interiors, myriad on-site activities, long-term health care options, age-friendly amenities and highlights of the neighborhood through multiple virtual tours.

Beyond virtual visions, Chicago-based SkyPan International took actual aerial photos via remote control helicopter for the Information and Design Center and Web site, www.theclareatwatertower.com. These photos show 360-degree views from what will be the development's 19th, 28th, 40th and 53rd floors. Additionally, a live Webcam provides updates on the construction progress, where to date more than 20 out of a total 53 floors have been completed. The center also showcases finishes and options for personalizing the residences.

"Homes have changed a lot over the years, and it can be difficult for seniors who may have not selected a new home for 20 or 30 years to envision a building when it's still under construction," said Angela Hanson, director of marketing for The Clare at Water Tower. "This new technology helps bring the urban architecture and senior-friendly design elements of The Clare to life in a way that can't be achieved with two-dimensional brochures and scale models."

For more information on Settlers Ridge, call (630) 466-7555; for Winthrop Club, call (847) 328-4700; and for The Clare at Water Tower, call (312) 951-5690.

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