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Housing starts still hinge on basics

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

After 43 years developing housing, some of the problems remain the same for a firm like Robertson Co. Community Developer of Bloomfield Hills.

Projects still hinge on the basics of the business — anticipation of consumer needs and desires as well as some ability to forecast the next area in demand. Zoning and building restrictions can have businesses and local governments at loggerheads.

In some ways it may have been easier in 1945, when Paul Robertson Sr. and his brother, Covert, each kicked in \$4,000 for some neglected lots in what was then the outer suburbs.

From that initial investment grew Robertson Co. Community Developers. The firm's latest project involves wetland development and golf course management.

Fresh out of the Navy, Paul Robertson Sr. joined his brother in investing in 100 lots on Elwood Street east of Coolidge in Berkeley.

"That was the end. That was as far as any development went in this town," Paul Robertson Jr. said.

THE YOUNGER Robertson is president of the firm created by his father and uncle. The original partnership endured until 1955, when Covert moved to California. The senior Robertson retired from the business last year.

Platted in the 1920s, the lots remained undeveloped during the Depression and war years. Sold for back taxes, the 40-foot lots went for some \$200 apiece. The brothers split the property to form some 150 50-foot lots.

"It was an opportunity that popped up. We had an idea in mind that we were building for servicemen," the elder Robertson said.

The senior Robertson built for a housing market of his peers.

"We were always building for my father's generation," Robertson Jr. said.

As Robertson Sr. recalls, the houses proved easier to sell than build.



Paul Robertson Jr. stands in front of condominium units that overlook the water at The Heathers.

"After the war it was very difficult to get materials. You had to wait weeks. I remember driving to Plymouth for 100 2-by-4-by-8's, the most common kind of lumber."

WAITING BECAME a fact of business life.

"You had to wait six weeks for everything," Robertson Sr. said.

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by-4s had air dried in position."

Those new houses were surrounded by older houses, which often were in disrepair. To keep the value of their investment, the brothers would approach owners of some of the older houses.

"We'd ask them, 'If we give you 10 gallons of paint, would you paint your house?' And they would."

IT WASN'T difficult to sell a new home at a time when former servicemen were anxious for family housing.

"When we were building, there'd

be no signs on the house," Robertson Sr. said.

"Otherwise we'd be besieged by phone calls. Once every four or five months we'd go out on a Sunday afternoon and stick an open house sign on the corner. We'd sit in the houses all afternoon. If we didn't sell a half dozen in an afternoon, we weren't doing our thing."

The two-bedroom, 800-square-foot houses sold for \$8,000-\$7,000. Eventually they built three-bedroom houses when families began growing.

By 1950, the kind of lots they had been using grew scarce. They picked

Troy as their next area.

"It was a natural extension of the Birmingham side," Robertson Sr. said.

CHOOSING THE next location involved educated second guessing.

"You have to figure where the traffic's going to go and where people want to go," Robertson Sr. said.

"You know why Birmingham-Bloomfield area attracted moneyed people? Golf courses. Not any kind of golf courses. Private golf courses. There are 10-15 golf courses in Bloomfield Township," he said.

In 1951, the brothers figured people wanted to go somewhere in the Birmingham area. They began building homes in the Pine Hills subdivision on Wattles at Adams in Troy. That land first came to Robertson Sr.'s notice when he took part in a

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Venture to business was a quick move

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

The need to evolve from a feisty entrepreneurial venture into a more polished organization can take a business almost by surprise.

A case in point is Robertson Brothers Co. Community Builders. Ten years ago, the firm remained pretty much a family entrepreneurial concern. Founded by the current president's father and uncle, the business details were handled by five people working out of a small office in Royal Oak.

When boom times hit, they hit fast.

"We had been doing about \$1 million to \$1.5 million for about 25 years. Our first foray into condos tripped our volume overnight," said Paul Robertson Jr., who joined the firm in 1969. "We went from \$1.5 million to \$5 million in 18 months."

Although business flourished, the details were cared for the way they had been when Paul Robertson Sr. and his brother Covert started in 1945. The elder Robertson fully retired from the firm last year. For most of their history they had built the kind of suburban houses sought by growing families.

Starting in Berkeley in 1946, the company built two- and three-bedroom houses for returning servicemen and their families. As the baby

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Sign in and say ah — software gives help on medical problems

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

Cross Pac-Man with Dr. Spock and you might get something resembling Lundin Laboratories' latest product.

The Southfield-based publisher of industrial software enters the home market with Family Care, a program offering medical advice to parents and caregivers.

Focusing on medical problems common to children from newborns to teens, the software is offered by mail order and through a growing number of dealerships. It's the brainchild of the firm's president, Roman Lundin.

"I looked at developing a program for adults, but it was easiest to do pediatrics. An adult will tell you what's wrong with them. Doctors handling children have to formulate their thinking. Kids don't talk like adults," Lundin said.

When he first had the idea in 1984, he began looking for pediatricians to work on the project. Through a network of referrals he linked up with a trio of pediatricians — Dr. Joyce Gutor Wolf, Dr. Jay W. Eastman and Dr. Ruben Kurnetz. All three teach at Wayne State University's College of Medicine, in the department of pediatric medicine and are associated with William Beaumont Hospital, Royal Oak.

Each section of the program was developed by one of the pediatricians and reviewed by the other two. The software took three years to develop.

Wolf, whose private practice is in Birmingham, said they tried to map out the kinds of questions parents frequently ask a pediatrician over the phone. "The software) deals with things parents can understand. It deals with symptoms," Wolf said.

When recommending action, the program takes a conservative stance. Symptoms of serious medical problems are mentioned first, and parents are advised to seek medical help immediately.

"We're dealing with an unknown group of people with an unknown degree of knowledge. Emergency questions are addressed first," Wolf said.

"We needed to be conservative. We don't know who the user is, what level of common sense, what level



Joyce Wolf and Roman Lundin with a computer program that helps define injuries, illnesses and then suggests treatments. The screen is displaying part of the program that deals with head injuries.

"We needed to be conservative. We don't know who the user is, what level of common sense, what level intelligence they have. We can't assume these things."

— Dr. Joyce Wolf

intelligence they have. We can't assume these things," she said.

A CONSERVATIVE approach also serves as the first line of defense against litigation. Several lawyers examined the program before Lundin put it on the market. "We didn't want a product that endangers anyone," he said. "Obviously we're concerned about liability; it's a medical product. The lawyers said that they don't see us creating special dangers to consumers."

The lawyers have said that no doctor/patient relationship was created," Wolf said. Legally, the program can be viewed in the same light as any advice manual, such as

Dr. Benjamin Spock's baby books.

"We tried to reduce liability by making the software simple to use," Wolf said.

The program takes users through a series of questions with "yes" or "no" answers. It can be used by the novice as well as the more experienced personal computer owner.

Answers are straightforward. Unlike similar programs used for industry, Family Care limits itself to exact answers. For example, users won't find answers which indicate there is a 75 per cent chance their child may have a certain disease or condition.

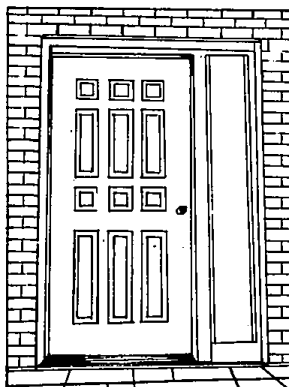
"It was written originally to be a directive and safe as it possibly can be," Wolf said.

Response to the program has been wider than originally anticipated. "We thought mostly upper income people would buy it, but we were wrong," Lundin said. Audiences ranges in annual family income from \$30,000 to over \$100,000, according to Lundin. In addition to parents, the software's been purchased by day care centers, elementary schools and summer camps.

PART OF The program's broad

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Elegance and Style

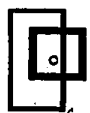


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