

BUSINESS

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HOUSING

NORTHERN LAND RUSH

Ashland Park near new Wal-Mart proves popular with first-time buyers

By DON DODSON
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CHAMPAIGN — Julie Wirth celebrated her 31st birthday last Tuesday by closing on the purchase of her first home.

Her gift to herself: a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house in the Ashland Park subdivision being developed just north of the new Wal-Mart in Champaign.

Wirth, an audiologist at Carle Clinic who works with hearing-impaired children, said she liked the idea of getting a new home for the right price. The base price for her house, not counting add-ons, was \$129,900.

"After having looked at existing homes in the same price range, I was getting more for my money for the size of the house — plus it was new," she said.

The price is apparently right for many people. So far, 60 houses have been sold in Ashland Park, the first residential subdivision to be built north of the Prospect Avenue commercial area.

That's a pretty impressive number, given that sales started only five weeks ago. Sixty-six building permits have been issued for houses there so far, with four of those permits for model homes.

The subdivision is being developed by the Atkins Group. Mike Martin, the company's director of residential development, gives founder Clint Atkins credit for recognizing a gap in the local housing market.

"He said moderately priced homes was the missing segment of the market, and I think he's been proved right based on the activity," Martin said.

The subdivision, which will ultimately have about 540 homes, currently has four different models for homes, with average sales prices from \$112,000 to \$152,000, he said.

The houses range from 1,025 square feet with a single-car garage to 1,599 square feet with a two-car garage.

Buyers have come from across the spectrum, Martin added. Some work in Interwise Research Park or the Apollo Industrial Subdivision in north Champaign. Others work in the commercial area immediately south of Ashland Park.

Still others are people moving in from St. Joseph and Rantoul who previously had a hard time finding new construction in Champaign-



Julie Wirth, standing near the picture window of her new home, lives in the Ashland Park subdivision, being developed in Champaign.



Urbana in that price range.

"It's been such a mixture," Ashland Park sales manager Rhonda Mitchell said. "A lot are first-time home buyers. Many have been renters and they're buying because they can get into these homes for less than what they're paying in rent."

"We also have a lot of empty-nesters who are

looking for an easier-maintenance lifestyle," she added. "A lot of people are coming in from out of state to work at the university or the hospitals. Some (of those at the university) have residences or are doctoral students."

Altogether, 170 homes are to be built in the subdivision's first phase. Sales have progressed to the point that engineering work began two weeks ago on the second phase. Earthwork on that phase is scheduled to begin this summer.

For now, most of the homes being built are clustered in the subdivision's southwest quadrant. Permits for 36 homes along Newton and Nobel drives were issued last fall, and 30 more were issued in late April for homes along Bardeen Lane.

Most of the street names so far relate to Nobel Prize winners who at some point were affiliated with the University of Illinois. John Bardeen won Nobels in physics in 1956 and 1972. Corey Lane, Daisy Lane and Leggett Lane are named for Elias J. Corey (chemistry, 1990), Edward A. Doisy (physiology or medicine, 1943) and Anthony J. Leggett (physics, 2003), respectively.

One notable exception to the Nobel theme is Toolson Lane, named for former Champaign Park District manager Robert Toolson. The park in the middle of the subdivision is also named for him.

The subdivision itself gets its name from Ashland Park, the farm the Stamey family operated on North Prospect before they sold the property to the Atkins Group. The Stameys have retained

Please see ASHLAND PARK, C-4

ASHLAND PARK

Continued from C-1

several parcels in the area for development.

The value of construction for most houses in Ashland Park ranges from \$64,000 to \$85,000 — an unusually low figure for new single-family homes in the Champaign-Urbana area.

Martin said building in volume keeps the costs low.

"It's all driven by quantity and low margins," he said.

Most of the work is done by subcontractors, with Pioneer Construction of St. Louis acting as construction manager for the subdivision. The average lot size there is 50 feet wide and 103 feet long.

Martin said the hardest thing so far has been projecting when new homes will be ready. For the first homes in the subdivision, buyers could choose from four models and select what options, such as crown molding and stone fronts, they wanted on their homes.

"We now have a feel for what they want," he said. "Now we're predetermining what kind of options to include in the homes. We need to be productive, and it's hard to be productive if you're doing lots of custom projects."

Interest in the subdivision apparently hasn't been harmed by traffic flow along North Prospect Avenue, which at times can be impeded by red lights.

Martin said he's never heard

that voiced as a concern. He pointed out that once Interstate Drive has been extended east to Neil Street, subdivision residents will be able to get to downtown Champaign and the University of Illinois by exiting onto Interstate Drive and turning south onto Neil.

Wirth said the traffic on North Prospect crossed her mind as she was weighing the decision to buy in Ashland Park.

"That was a little bit of a concern," she said. "However, at 8 in the morning, it's not that bad. The primary concern is the evening traffic. Now I can cut through by the mall (via Town Center Boulevard), and it's not bad."

She said she likes the idea of being close to stores and restaurants.

"There are definite advantages to being that close to the commercial area," she said. "There are some disadvantages in terms of traffic, but they balance themselves out."

Although Ashland Park is the first major subdivision to be developed north of Interstate 74 since Dobbins Downs nearly a half-century ago, it's not likely to be the last.

Martin said the Atkins Group is already looking to develop an area near the High School of St. Thomas More for an even larger subdivision. But those homes will be more greatly varied than those in Ashland Park, he said.