

The Woodlands at Austin Lake

By Gretchen Johnson

The Woodlands at Austin Lake in Portage is a planned condominium development that is truly rare. Built on 35 wooded acres, it offers residents an exceptional living experience in a natural setting designed for sustainability and low environmental impact. But developers Bill and Jackie Patterson didn't set out to build green. In fact, they were well into construction before they realized that's what they were doing.

"We wanted energy-efficient, environmentally friendly homes and we wanted quality construction," Jackie says. The Woodlands is just seven minutes from Crossroads Mall in Portage, closer still to both I-94 and the Kalamazoo airport. Yet it remains a natural oasis. The Pattersons have lived and worked in the Kalamazoo region most of their lives. They've been business owners, served on civic boards and both are currently on the Portage 2025 visioning committee. Stewards of the community, it never occurred to them to be anything but stewards of nature, too.

"Jackie found this beautiful site," Bill says. "We started looking at 'how can we lay it out and keep the site beautiful and still make it functional?'"



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This condominium was featured in the 2007 Parade of Homes, and as all of the units at The Woodlands, is certified as an Energy Star 5-Plus home.

So, the Pattersons built around the natural topography, not molding it to meet their needs. "One of the first challenges was site design itself," Jackie says. "We spent months trying to figure out where we wanted the condos and the streets to keep the site as natural as possible."

The result was a 78-unit complex surrounding a wetlands nature preserve that is planned in three phases — the Pattersons are building in phase two now. Residents share a three-season enclosed, furnished gazebo with a fireplace and a fire pit for summer evenings. There are waterfalls, a koi pond and common gardens throughout, as well as walking trails. Near the entrance to the development, the koi pond bears the name of Jackie's mother, who died of cancer before the Pattersons broke ground on the project. Rain gardens and natural conveyances wind through the property, adding to the beauty and serving a dual purpose as part of The Woodlands' natural drainage system.

"Typically, when you deal with runoff, you go in and flatten out the land, put in curb and gutter and run storm sewers to a big retention pond," Bill explains. "We didn't want to do that, so we had to find another solution that would meet our drainage needs but still keep the natural, remote, wooded feel."

The Pattersons hired an environmental specialist who helped them design a natural drainage system in a way that meets the state of Michigan's best practices. By calculating rainfall and taking into account all of the impermeable surfaces, the specialist was able to project runoff needs and calculate the design needs for a series of rain gardens. Jackie explains how it works. "All the rain gutters of the houses are buried under ground. They divert runoff to a series of rain gardens that we've planted. To create the gardens,



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The entrance to The Woodlands at Austin Lake, a planned green-condominium development

we planted native plants on top of sand so that the water soaks in and filters through the vegetation and sand. It's designed to handle a significant amount of water."

The creative use of landscaping diverts any additional water to the wetlands at the center of The Woodlands. The system is functional, natural and beautiful.

"Then all we had to do was sell the city," says Bill. "They were used to curb-gutter-retention pond designs. Fortunately, though, Portage is very progressive. They were very open and receptive to the idea. They liked it. They reviewed our calculations and our design and said, 'This will work.' Now they send other builders here to look at what we've done."

Bill and Jackie didn't set out to build green condominiums, let alone a green community. The success of their accomplishment, however, speaks for itself. They received an award for excellence in green building for their 2008 Parade Home. And Jerry Thatcher, owner of Energy Diagnostics, and an Energy Star rater and green-built certification specialist, says he considers The Woodlands to be one of the finest examples of a green-built development that he has seen.

"We have many friends here. They weren't friends before, but after going through the building process, they are now. We have reserved a site for ourselves in phase three!" Jackie says.

The Pattersons designed the layout of the property to ensure privacy for each homeowner. It has winding roads, natural wooded islands and various driveway lengths. Each unit looks out on woods from the back and decks are very private. To further ensure privacy and quiet, the duplex units share a garage wall only. A full 8 feet separates the walls of each unit's living space. Meeting each owner's unique needs was another essential component in the Pattersons' original plan for The Woodlands, where "custom" includes almost unlimited structural, floor plan, landscaping and façade choices, as well as details like whole-house music, security systems, surround sound and a nearly infinite list of cabinet and counter material and



Bill and Jackie Patterson, sitting by the koi pond at The Woodlands

PHOTOS BY ANTHONY DUGAL PHOTOGRAPHY

design options. They custom build each condo to the expectations and desires of the buyer.

"From the beginning, we built each unit the way we would want it if we were going to live there ourselves," Jackie Patterson says. So, they framed the exterior walls with 2"x6" studs; installed Pella windows and doors; used paints, stains and varnishes that yield low VOCs; they used advanced framing techniques to reduce environmental impact and allow for optimal insulation; and they installed high-efficiency heating and cooling and energy-efficient appliances.

"We were five units into building when I said to Bill, 'I think what we're doing meets a lot of the criteria for building green,'" Jackie says. "And when we built the next unit, we brought in a 'green' inspector to rate the project. We were at the Silver level and just eight points away from being Gold." The Pattersons have since had each unit certified as an Energy Star 5-Plus home — the highest rating available — and have received a letter from the inspector who says the quality of craftsmanship and the attention to green elements in the first homes built suggests that they probably meet the green criteria, too, though they weren't certified.

"We put in gutter guards, we use the highest-quality roofing and siding," says Jackie. "We use composite decking to make maintenance easy."

Together, the Pattersons are the owners, developers, builders, sales staff, designers, landscape architects and decorators. Residents of The Woodlands say that the Pattersons' personal investment — not just their money, but also their labor and their love — has created a unique sanctuary that's truly special. "We belong to this community. We love this community," says Jackie. "We want to leave something that's lasting. We want to give people value when they build or buy, but we also want to give them value for a long time."

For more information, contact The Woodlands at Austin Lake at (269) 384-3067 or www.thewoodlandsataustinlake.com. ■