

For tony home buyers, contracting is a retail experience

By Rosalie Earle
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WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS — One-stop shopping isn't a concept normally associated with building a house, especially a multimillion-dollar one.

But that's what will be offered to home builders in the Greenbrier Sporting Club development, an upscale second-home complex on The Greenbrier's outlying property and affiliated with the resort.

Sterling Construction Management plans to build a 6,000- to 8,000-square-foot design center with showrooms next to its offices on U.S. 60, just off the interstate exit. There, it will lease space to businesses such as Creative Kitchens, Wine Cellaring Sales Place and Terra Care, the landscape designers, as well as several architectural firms.

"It will provide one-stop shopping,"

The idea is to make "the construction process as easy and as pleasurable as possible" for customers who are extremely busy, President Robert E. Vass III said.

said Mimi Coffman, Sterling's director of client services. "It will make it easier to customize and personalize services."

Sterling is in the business of managing house construction projects, acting as the homeowner's advocate, said President Robert E. Vass III. It works with the architect, contractor, subcontractors and interior designers to come up with a plan and a guaranteed maximum.

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possible" for customers who are extremely busy, he said.

Most of Sterling's houses are in the Sporting Club, where 95 percent of the clients are absentee. All tend to be "very discerning buyers," Vass said.

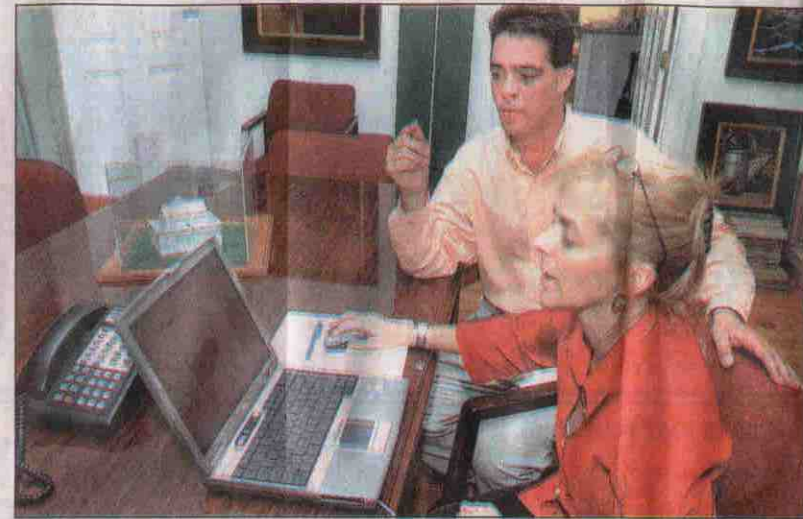
Sometimes, Sterling is the contractor, sometimes not. It charges a commission based on construction costs.

The company was formed in 2000 to facilitate construction of the first housing development to go up on The Greenbrier property, known as the Copeland Cottages.

Today Vass estimates that Sterling is managing the construction of 60 percent of the custom-built houses in the Sporting Club's neighborhoods. He said he expects to do \$15 million in residential construction over the next 10 to 12 years.

Owners can go online to view pictures charting their home's progress, review what work still needs to be done and

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CHIP ELLIS/Sunday Gazette-Mail

Mimi Coffman and Robert Vass work for Sterling Construction Management in White Sulphur Springs, which is bringing together appliance and design companies to create a one-stop shop for home builders.

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monitor their accounts. The sites are updated every two weeks.

"We even have a daily weather report so we can't fudge and blame snow for a delay," Vass joked.

Homeowners like to forward photographs on to their friends and family, he said. And they can e-mail questions and comments to their project manager. (Sterling has nine.)

Originally from Huntington,

Vass moved to Lewisburg in 1995 after working for a big construction company in Northern Virginia. As a native, he said, he takes a lot of pleasure and pride in seeing the impact the construction boom is having in Greenbrier County — as well as the local talent and craftsmanship involved.

"There is in this area incredible talent," he said. The workers "are doing world-class work."

Many of the architects involved, some from New York and Florida, can be very exacting. But "if they want French-cut limestone or depressed Venetian

plaster, we have people who can do it," Vass said.

The Sterling office sits just beyond the new "Welcome to White Sulphur Springs" sign on the west side of town. A 200-year-old log cabin is incorporated into the two-story Colonial-style building.

The design center will be a three-minute drive from the Greenbrier Sporting Club, down Sam Snead Boulevard. Construction is planned to begin in the spring.

In addition to showrooms, the center will have warehousing and receiving space. And there'll

be a functional display kitchen that will showcase high-end appliances, such as Kohler, Sub-Zero Freezer refrigeration and Wolf gas ranges.

Local chefs, many of whom Vass said have gone through The Greenbrier's culinary school, will use the kitchen to prepare meals for Sterling's clients or for other private functions. That way, he said, homeowners won't just see the equipment in operation, but may also discover a caterer for their parties.

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