



THE PLAIN DEALER

Subdivision homeowners get holiday bill

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Some 200 residents of a sprawling Olmsted Township subdivision got an ugly surprise in the mail last Thursday.

A letter from their builder, Pulte Homes, said each owes \$4,135 more than they expected for the new homes.

The letter invited owners, who began buying roomy colonials at Woodgate Farms about two years ago, to settle the special Cuyahoga County assessment in "one lump sum payable by Dec. 31, 2004."

An alternative is to spread the total out in 40 installments of \$167.14 each over the next 20 years, said a letter from Bob Dyer, Pulte vice president of land acquisition. Such a financing scheme would bring the total due, interest included, to about \$6,685.

Many residents of the 300-acre subdivision said the surprise assessment outraged them.

Word spread quickly once people opened and read their mail, and groups of from 50 to 85 residents met Sunday at the development's community center and then again Tuesday night.

The topic on the table: how to confront what Terri Andrus, a real estate agent who lives in Woodgate, called "a huge disclosure issue."

"Everybody says they were never told this assessment was coming. They're upset," Andrus said. "It's a lot of money, \$4,200."

Louise Veverka, who, with her husband, Henry, moved into their home in 2003, said no mention of a special assessment ever came up in any talks with sales agents and didn't appear in their purchase agreement. "It's the same thing with neighbors we've talked to," she said. The homeowners likely will seek legal advice.

How the special assessment came to materialize is a twisting tale involving the township, Cuyahoga County, Woodgate Farms' master developer, Forest City, and several home builders, including Pulte, Wheaton Development and Garland Griffen Homes.

The amount due from homeowners, according to Robert Klaiber, the county engineer, is for the development's access to public sewer and water lines.

Five years ago, he said, when Olmsted Township balked at funding these improvements for the planned development, Forest City agreed to cover the costs to get Woodgate

Farms under way.

The county bid out the job and hired a contractor to run lines to the development site. The bill for that work totals around \$4,100 for each home site, Klaiber said.

Usually developers roll such site preparation costs into the price of their homes. But in the ensuing deals among Forest City and the several home-building companies that are putting up houses in Woodgate Farms, Klaiber guessed the financial issue "never got settled."

Forest City executives involved with the Woodgate planning did not return any of several phone calls for comment Wednesday.

The Cuyahoga County Planning Department said it gave approval for the construction of 1,475 houses on the parcels, which lie along Schady Road southwest of where Stearns Road dead-ends. The houses sell from the low-\$200,000s to the mid- \$300,000 range.

Chrisa Carlson, who, with her husband, Michael, moved into their Woodgate home in November 2002, said, "I was floored when I read Pulte's letter. We didn't know anything about a special assessment. I don't know how they can get away with this."

Many of the Carlsons' neighbors said the same thing; no sales agent, no Pulte executive, no purchase agreement stipulates that there would be an additional financial encumbrance they must satisfy besides the home's price, usual closing costs and normal real estate taxes the county would assess.

There's another contentious issue between some Woodgate residents and their builder, Pulte Homes. A row of houses that back up against a long, slender water-retention basin, have suffered repeated flooding in basements because of engineering problems with the pond and the trenches that enclose sewer lines running to each house.

Residents Neil Friery and his neighbor Veverka say they have sump pumps in their basements that, Friery said, "cycle just about every minute" to remove water that can puddle on the basement floor.

When the power in the subdivision fails - as it has several times - puddles turn to small floods. Pulte agreed to put long er-lasting batteries in the pumps to keep them running and forestall more flooding.

Pulte's Dyer said the home builder also intends to "repair this problem. It's essentially under control." The company agreed to lower the retention basin's water level by assuring drainage ditches remain clear of debris and also to add water-impervious clay to the sewer-line trenches.

Still, for Friery, confronting an unexpected \$4,100 assessment for sewer and water connections that, in his and some neighbors' case, have gone decidedly awry, leading to water in basements is more of an irony than he wants to consider.

"Pulte says it's settled; that remains to be seen," he said. "But getting an assessment like this, that's the straw that broke the camel's back."

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