

S.C. developer says schools should be centerpiece of homebuilding

By Joy L. Woodson · & 2008 The (Columbia) State
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COLUMBIA -- Columbia

businessman Don Tomlin is proposing a new way for developers statewide to do business: Make sure large-scale residential projects have schools linked to them.

Tomlin, who developed Lake Carolina in Northeast Richland, among other projects, pledged that he would never again spearhead a major residential project without making schools a centerpiece of the planning.

He urged others to do the same during a meeting Wednesday about schools and real estate with State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex and about two dozen developers, public education advocates and legislators. Tomlin and Rex gathered the group to discuss ways to build innovative environments for learning.

"I'm not going to count on luck again," said Tomlin, saying he was simply lucky that "great" schools were already part of the landscape at Lake Carolina and in Charleston, where he and his brother developed Park West, a 1,700-acre residential community.

The idea stems, in part, from Tomlin's frustration with trying to collaborate with local school leaders on master plans for new developments.

He said he also has been a witness to public school choices that work, such as charter schools and magnet schools, enabling entire communities to benefit.

Good schools drive up property values, Tomlin said.

"The real estate industry needs to give back to education," he said. "More than making houses, and making lots, they need to innovate, and spend the time, effort and money into education."

Leaders at the meeting were attentive, but pointed out many concerns with creating the kinds of developments they hope for.

Mainly, developers said they constantly fight a negative perception of their goals. Relationships with local school boards, school funding constraints and lack of legislative incentives also are concerns.

But Rex was encouraged that the two dozen leaders who gathered were willing to do something to help.

They understand, he said, "that you can't have great communities without great schools, and that that needs to be a part of their concept from the very beginning."

The concept reportedly is working in Denver, Colo, where education officials and real estate developers are building multi-million-dollar projects that include schools, community services and homes for struggling areas.

That effort was spearheaded by a developer-led nonprofit group, the

Foundation for Educational Excellence.

Key players in that effort helped the group see how it could work in South Carolina, something Rex and others say is possible.

Gregg Robinson, executive director of the Orangeburg County Development Commission, said it's time to consider and do such options in South Carolina.

"We're seeing some of our brightest students leave," he said.

Partnerships with businesses, developers and schools can change that, Robinson said.

"What helps sustain communities is it education or is jobs?" he said. "It's really one big thing."

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