

IN DEPTH: WASHINGTON'S LARGEST PRIVATE COMPANIES

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CamWest owner saves forests and builds new homes on previously developed land

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Eric Campbell has made a career of developing home sites that nobody wants.

As president of Kirkland-based CamWest Development Inc., Campbell builds houses on previously developed property. Rather than chop down more Eastside forests, he looks for sites ripe for redevelopment or neighborhoods with room for more houses.

"It's the ultimate recycling," Campbell said. "I've always been a supporter of the growth management act and I believe natural beauty makes the Northwest a great place to live."

The Growth Management Act, which encourages development within existing city boundaries instead of suburban sprawl, hasn't been embraced by all developers. Campbell started CamWest in 1989 because he wanted to go a different route than other local builders.

So far, it's worked. Boosted by low interest rates, CamWest has been growing by 15 percent a year. In 2002, the home-building company brought in \$115 million in revenue. Though interest rates are going up, Campbell believes improvements in the job market will continue to fuel demands for his homes.

Abiding by environmental ideals isn't easy for a developer. Existing neighborhoods often object to the increased density CamWest's homes represent, while a new suburban community cut out of the woods won't spark the "not in my backyard" protests.

"The development community said they were better off going where there was no neighborhood opposition," Campbell said.

When building homes near existing ones, CamWest works with city government on neighborhood compatibility issues. Since established neighborhoods have varying design themes, CamWest constantly designs new architecture.

One recent project with design guidelines involved 22 acres of surplus county property originally intended to be a transfer station. King County Executive Ron Sims and the city of Woodinville worked with CamWest to oversee a mix of homes, rentals and senior homes.

Previously developed sites also may have environmental problems that require extra work and money from the builder. CamWest purchased a horse ranch with a stream running through it that needed restoration.

"It's expensive and it takes a lot of legal and marketing expertise," Campbell said. "Larger competitors weren't as interested in those parcels, but I had patience."

Campbell has been fortunate with timing. When he started CamWest, Microsoft began hiring large numbers of workers. The new arrivals were interested in short commutes, which put Eastside developments in hot demand. CamWest has grown to 45 employees.

Currently, CamWest is offering bungalow style cottages in Bothell that border a creek and sell in the \$300,000s, and Campbell said they're selling swiftly.

Another project, the Trails at Redmond Ridge, is surrounded by wetlands and has eight units per acre. Typical subdivisions have larger lots, but King County mandated greater density. Campbell said CamWest runs into homeowners who are looking for bigger lots, but they also want something under \$500,000, and the Trails at Redmond Ridge sell in the \$300,000s.

In recent years, CamWest has built more townhomes, houses on small lots, and cottages. Home buyers want better quality architecture, great rooms with the living room and kitchen connected, and a spacious master bedroom and bath, Campbell said. Homes have higher ceilings and incorporate more color.

Since Campbell knows the Eastside well, he doesn't plan on expanding to other markets in the next three to five years.

"Real estate is hard to plan much beyond that," Campbell said.