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Terra Land Group of Novi is developing urban style live/work condos like Legato@Webster Place in Ferndale for a new breed of entrepreneurial buyers who want greater flexibility in housing.

Business booming in live/work homes

■ Young entrepreneurs like price, flexibility and lifestyle of residing where they also can set up shop.

By MAUREEN McDONALD
Special to The Detroit News

WALLED LAKE — Before Ron Vandenbrook purchased a live/work condominium this summer in Walled Lake, he found himself at odds with his residential townhouse community and ignored as a Dish Network dealer because he lacked a formal storefront.

With part-time custody of three children, he said he shopped extensively for an affordable solution.

"Come see my neon sign in the window, business is booming," says Vandenbrook, owner of TVG Entertainment who draws customers from downtown Walled Lake passing along Maple and Pontiac Trail. He paid \$199,900 for a two-story unit with a 350-square-foot retail operation at ground level and 1,200-square-foot residence upstairs.

Vandenbrook shares the block with a nail salon, art dealer, jewelry retailer and others, the kind of mix the developers envisioned. If his kids are bored downstairs, they have three bedrooms, two baths and a large living room to occupy their time. The two-car garage functions as a home for his truck and business storage.

"People who live flexible lives look for housing that complements their interests," says Geof Greeneisen, vice president of the Terra Land Group, noting that the units qualify for residential mort-

Terra Land Group

■ **Company:** The Novi-based development firm generates \$12 million in annual sales on an average of 75 houses/townhouses.

■ **Specialty:** The firm recently introduced 1,550-square-foot live/work condominiums in Walled Lake and Ferndale for people seeking a start-up business address and residential home with one mortgage payment.

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gages. "We seek the young, urban professionals who wish to locate in vibrant arrangements."

Building and selling mixed-use dwellings take cooperation from city councils and zoning boards that must give approval for adaptive use, according to Greeneisen. Each floor could be leased separately or used as a single-family dwelling or single work space. Some people create projects upstairs and sell on the ground floor.

Greeneisen and his team visited numerous live/work developments in Washington state, Florida and Maryland, evaluating the best and worst ideas. Among critical needs were storage space and secured parking. The communities most willing to embrace flexible zoning were those with enough young, forward thinking buyers at the \$200,000 price point, he said.

Live/work units bode well for the region at large, according to Constance Budorow, professor of architecture at University of Detroit Mercy. "The mixed-use housing concept has been around for about a decade in Los Angeles and

Santa Fe, N.M., where large numbers of artisans gravitate," Budorow said. "The fact that developers are bringing the dual housing plans to Michigan is a sign that we're finally embracing our creative class."

Budorow noted the idea is a retreat from early 20th century housing models when shopkeepers lived with their families in close knit urban communities. Today the housing has greater interest than single-family subdivisions. Greeneisen said his firm was forced to auction some houses in Livingston County this fall to help move its inventory.

"We're seeing more action where we have the lowest financial barrier to entry," he said.

Other developers are joining the fray. Novi-based Crosswinds Community has upscale live/work dwellings and artisan lofts on Eaton in Birmingham. The units start at mid-\$300,000, with up to four floors of convertible space.

To create the artisan feel, Greeneisen said the architect used industrial materials in construction, such as split face block, corrugated steel and limestone headers. Each node of the development has 14 units, including seven two-story and seven one-story units.

Vandenbrook, the Dish Network dealer, said the live/work development is an idea waiting to happen for entrepreneurs who can apply what they spent on commuting to cold-calling new customers.

"I can come to work in my sweats and socks. It is so sweet."

Maureen McDonald is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.