



True to his vision

R.B. Fitch's Fearington Village is growing, slowly, in Chatham



STAFF PHOTOS BY LESLIE BARBOUR

Fearington Village consists of multiple types of dwellings, shops (including The Potting Shed, below), restaurants and an inn for visiting guests.

"It's very important for us to keep open space, and keep our rural scene." — R.B. Fitch

BY REBEKAH L. COWELL
CORRESPONDENT

North Chatham hasn't always been seen as an ideal spot to live. In 1974, when R.B. and Jenny Fitch purchased a dairy farm that was two centuries old from the Jesse Fearington family, some in Chapel Hill considered it out in the sticks.

How things change. Today, northern Chatham County is seeing a development boom, coinciding with the widening of U.S. 15-501 from two to four lanes just two years ago.



Fitch

"The highway really opened up this area," said R.B. Fitch, developer of Fearington Village. "It's easier to get to and from Chapel Hill and all points south."

Within a two-mile radius of Fearington Village, high-end housing developments are under construction, promising to bring thousands of new families to the area.

Fearington, halfway between Chapel Hill and Pittsboro, spans 1,400 acres with more than 1,200 homes. About two-thirds of its 1,800 residents are retired.

Cheryl Gallan moved to Fearington in August 1996. "Three weeks before Hurricane Fran pounded my newly renovated home," she said. "The paint on the front door hadn't even dried!"



FEARRINGTON FACTS

Existing units: 1,200
Additional planned Units: 400
Existing homes: \$240,000 to \$500,000
New construction: \$500,000 and up
Lots: \$82,000 to \$250,000
Real Estate office hours:
Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
(919) 542-4000
www.fearington.com

Gallan moved to North Carolina from Connecticut 29 years ago, and was living in downtown Pittsboro working as director of community relations at Central Carolina Hospital in Lee County, when she

made her move to Fearington Village with her son, who was entering his sophomore year of high school.

"This was the first planned unit development in Chatham," Gallan said. "(Fitch's) genius was to model it after a British village and place the stores and housing away from the 15-501 corridor, something Chatham Citizens for Effective Communities has been urging for Chatham County to do with advocating for compact, walkable communities."

Fearington residents have consistently been drawn to the village's open space, sense of community and rural character. The Belted Galloway cows with their black and white Oreo coloring, were added to the farm in 1983, giving Fearington an iconic mascot.

"My vision was to build a village, and to do it slowly," Fitch said.

He talks with candor that comes from age and experience as he reflects on the 34 years of the village he started in middle age.

"I have a tendency to try anything. Some things work, some don't," he said. "The most challenging business I have come across is the restaurant business; I'm still trying to figure that one out."

As a builder, Fitch sees a growing trend toward energy efficiency and green building.

"In the '70s when we started out, we emphasized a lot of energy conservation measures including solar and a digital energy monitoring device. At that

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time it was premature, and people didn't have enough interest in conservation," he said. "When people feel the need economically, they will start to think in an environmental way and that's what we are seeing now, an upsurge in energy efficient building."

The village has more than a dozen established neighborhoods, including five still in active development. Homes include townhomes, single-family homes, patio homes, and attached courtyard homes.

When does Fitch envision completing the 400 remaining homes?

Perhaps by 2020, he says, though as the only builder in the development, he oversees each nuance of the process and says construction could extend further.

Jon Condoret, Fearington's chief architect, has been designing homes for the past 25 years.

"We really know our product, and it enables us to focus on what our customers want," he said.

Recently, Fitch and his team have purposely slowed down construction, "We're seeing houses getting bigger and bigger, and we want to focus on each project fully before going to the next thing," he said. The median square footage has increased from about 1,500 square feet to about 2,400 square feet.

Projects moving forward will include larger acre-plus lots with custom homes, and more courtyard-attached homes.

"Change happens everywhere, but Mr. Fitch's original vision ensures a good future within the village," Gallan said. "I hope he remains committed to the shops and retail area of Fearington that form the heart and provide some of the 'glue' that brings folks together — young and old. That is my biggest concern. We have brought business via friends and family and we essentially market the community for him. My own brother decided to retire here from Arlington, Virginia, and purchased a townhome."

At one time, New Englanders contributed a significant number of new residents but that's not the trend Fitch notices today,

"We're seeing a lot of North Carolinians move here," he said. With the expansion of 15-501, the commute from Fearington into the Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill regions doesn't present the



STAFF PHOTO BY LESLIE BARBOUR

Ann and Jim Guthrie walk along a path around Fearington Village toward the shops and restaurants. Fearington Village was created by R.B. Fitch in the 1970s with the plan of creating a village community that maintains the look and tranquility of the original farm. The 640-acre village has 1,200 homes in more than a dozen established neighborhoods. Fitch estimates he will build the 400 remaining homes by 2020.

hassle it once did, and Chatham Downs barely two miles north of Fearington, offers a Harris Teeter, ACE Hardware, and Starbucks, making shopping convenient for residents of both Fearing-

ton Village and Governor's Club.

Fitch believes the trend of Triangle residents moving into the Village stems from city growth. "Taxes have increased for city-dwellers, and many want to have a

nice quiet community life, and some aspects of rural scenery," he said.

"It's very important for us to keep open space, and keep our rural scene," he said. "This has made Fearington unique, and

will continue to do so."

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Cheryl Gallan

Fearington Village resident