

# housing giants

CEO SPOTLIGHT

## On the Firing Line

The CEOs of Main Street Homes want a stimulus package that targets first-time buyers.



Main Street Homes CEOs David LeBoeuf, left, and Steve Bartholomew

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Bill Lurz

### On the Firing Line

The CEOs of Austin, Texas-based Main Street Homes are banking on a stimulus package that targets first-time buyers.

**‘This market is still viable, but it’s tough right now.’** — Steve Bartholomew



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## STAFF

**Editorial Director**  
Paul Deffenbaugh, 630/288-8190  
[paul.deffenbaugh@reedbusiness.com](mailto:paul.deffenbaugh@reedbusiness.com)

**Assistant Managing Editor**  
Sara Zailskas, 630/288-8197  
[sara.zailskas@reedbusiness.com](mailto:sara.zailskas@reedbusiness.com)

**Senior Editors**  
Bill Lurz, 941/371-4804  
[bill.lurz@reedbusiness.com](mailto:bill.lurz@reedbusiness.com)

Mark Jarasek, 630/288-8171  
[mark.jarasek@reedbusiness.com](mailto:mark.jarasek@reedbusiness.com)

Felicia Oliver, 630/288-8483  
[felicia.oliver@reedbusiness.com](mailto:felicia.oliver@reedbusiness.com)

**Contributing Editors**  
John Burns, Rick Heaston,  
Michael Kahn, Michael Dickens

**Editorial Assistant**  
Jennifer Powell, 630/288-8297  
[jennifer.powell@reedbusiness.com](mailto:jennifer.powell@reedbusiness.com)

**Production Editor**  
Kristin Foster, 630/288-8167  
[kristin.foster@reedbusiness.com](mailto:kristin.foster@reedbusiness.com)

**Creative Director**  
Bill Patton, 630/288-8050  
[bpatt@reedbusiness.com](mailto:bpatt@reedbusiness.com)

**Senior Art Director**  
Paula Girshman, 630/288-8560  
[paula.girshman@reedbusiness.com](mailto:paula.girshman@reedbusiness.com)

**Circulation Manager**  
Angela Tanner, 800/446-6551  
[subsmail@reedbusiness.com](mailto:subsmail@reedbusiness.com)

**Vice President, Residential Construction Group**  
Julian Francis, 630/288-8826  
[julian.franis@reedbusiness.com](mailto:julian.franis@reedbusiness.com)

**Publisher**  
Tony Mancini, 610/205-1180  
[armancini@reedbusiness.com](mailto:armancini@reedbusiness.com)

**Director of Finance**  
Bruce Ksiazek, 630/288-8120  
[bkksiazek@reedbusiness.com](mailto:bkksiazek@reedbusiness.com)

**Research Director**  
Barbara Allelujka, 630/288-8175  
[barbara.allelujka@reedbusiness.com](mailto:barbara.allelujka@reedbusiness.com)

**Editorial & Publishing Office**  
Reed Residential Group  
2000 Clearwater Drive, Oak Brook, IL 60523  
Telephone: 630/288-8000; Fax: 630/288-8145

Letters to the Editor: Housing Giants,  
2000 Clearwater Drive, Oak Brook, IL  
60523; fax 630/288-8145; e-mail:  
[paul.deffenbaugh@reedbusiness.com](mailto:paul.deffenbaugh@reedbusiness.com).  
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By [Bill Lurz](#), Senior Editor, Business

# CONFERENCE BOARD SAYS ECONOMY COULD LOSE ANOTHER 2 MILLION JOBS THIS YEAR

**But it's important to note statistics' lag time, Bill notes in his blog, [Ear to the Ground](#).**

The Conference Board just issued its latest [Employment Trends Index](#), and it's more nasty news. The index now stands at 99.6, decreasing 1.6 percent from the November revised figure of 101.2 and down almost 16 percent from a year ago. It's been declining for 17 months.

In its press release, the Board quotes senior economist Gad Levanon saying, "During 2008, total non-farm employment declined by more than 2.5 million and the sharp declines ... suggest that in 2009 this number

could grow by another 2 million."

My only caution on this is that, although we are now in a digital age when information seems to travel at the speed of light, these statistical measures still have a huge time lag built into them. We knew a lot of housing markets were in trouble at the end of 2005, which is a lot more than 17 months ago. Just recall the days when your own sales reports told you there was a big problem, but local consumer media outlets were

## PETITION TO CONGRESS

Bill wrote his state's representatives in support of [Fix Housing First's](#) agenda. The replies disturb him. Read why on [his blog](#).

still trumpeting that the overall economy was in great shape.

The problem, of course, is that when these headlines hit the Web sites, it makes it that much harder to sell houses. And the only way we get positive headlines is if we *do* sell houses and create jobs. The good news is that statistics like these projections from the Conference

**The only way we get positive headlines is if we *do* sell houses and create jobs.**

Board, which has been doing this for 90 years and has a lot of credibility, will carry major weight on Capitol Hill. We'll get some kind of action from Congress before spring, although I have my doubts that the stimulus package will put the taxpayers' money in the right place.

An interesting twist to this: I'm starting to hear land developers talk about seeking land positions to benefit from the impending "Obama Boom," and one of the things they're discussing is land adjacent to military

bases. Some of them seem to believe there's going to be an immediate need for affordable ownership housing for military families.

Just remember, you'll know there's a housing recovery in the works long before the Conference Board tells you. Or we could all just go back to working on the farm! **HG**

## VIDEO EDITORIAL

What can builders learn from President Obama's cabinet selections?



## NEWS

Texas Builder  
Refuses to Join  
Downturn

Despite a challenging economy and crashing housing market, **LGI Homes** of Conroe, Texas (northeast of Houston), just completed its third consecutive year of increased sales thanks in large part to an abject refusal to participate in the market downturn. It's a lesson every builder could use today.

LGI moved up to No. 278 last year in *Professional Builder's Giant 400 report*. In 2008, the firm hit 475 closings for \$63 million. This May, we'll learn just how high in the rankings LGI will jump this year, but our money is on another big leap.

LGI president Eric Lipar and executive vice president Mike Snider, who heads the home building side of the business, attribute their

success to a customer-focused corporate culture and extremely aggressive marketing and sales. All the closings come from just three subdivisions, two in Houston, one in San Antonio. "Our goal is to get people out of apartments and into home ownership," says Snider. "We don't wait for them to come to us. We go after them."

LGI spends \$60,000 per subdivision each month on direct mail advertising to area apartment complexes. All of LGI's homes are priced between \$95,000 and \$160,000, but the firm never mentions price in its marketing — only the dollars required to carry a home in monthly payment. "It's often less expensive for a customer to buy from us than to continue to rent," Snider says.

On the construction side, LGI keeps everything simple, offering only six floor plans per subdivision with no options. The firm builds

spec homes, ready for move-in, but no model homes. "They tour the home they'll buy," says Snider. "Our average build time is 45 days, and we build three or four at a time. The trades never leave the subdivision," Snider boasts.

In sales, the emphasis is on striking while the fire is hot: sales offices are open 8:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week. "We spend a lot of time training our sales people," Snider says. "We give them 100 days of training before they are ever allowed to serve customers and start making sales.

Snider's words of wisdom: "Two areas where builders should never cut their budgets are marketing and sales training. If you do the marketing right, the phones will start ringing. Once that happens, you'd better have a great sales staff, because when they call is the moment their desire to buy is at its highest." — *Bill Lurz*

**The Next \$350 Billion** — Bloomberg TV

Questions are being raised on what President Obama will do with the next \$350 billion. Watch this interview with Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio from Bloomberg TV.

**Builder Rents Over Buys** — Housing Wire

California Coastal Communities, based in Irvine, Calif., sold model homes to an investor who in turn leased it back to the home builder.

**Collaboration Builds 'Senior Home of the Future'** — Building Online

**Eskaton Senior Services** collaborated with various companies to produce what it refers to as a "senior home of the future" in Roseville, Calif.

**Roundtable Discussion on Fixing the Housing Market** — Bloomberg TV

The CEO of Mortgage Bankers Association, John Courson, and economist Jay Brinkman participate in a roundtable discussion on what they think is necessary to fix the housing market.

**IndyMac Sold for \$13.9 Billion**

— CNNMoney.com

The **Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.** sold failed mortgage lender IndyMac to private investors for \$13.9 billion.

*continued on page 5*



**How Some Arizona Home Builders Are Getting Creative** — The Arizona Republic

It's survival of the fittest. Home builders in Arizona pull creative ideas out of the hat to turn a bad thing into something good.

**Top 10 Green Trends in 2009** — PRWeb

Jerry Yudelson, a green building consultant, gives his predictions on the green building industry for 2009.

**Pulte Designs Homes to Span Lifetime**

— Chicago Tribune

**Pulte Homes** has changed its focus to the "buyer for life" — from first-time to move-up to active adult.

**The Status of the Housing Market**

— Bloomberg TV

Watch this interview with outgoing HUD Secretary Steven Preston on the status of



the housing market. What is President Obama in for as he takes office?

**Housing Push for Hispanics Contributed to Foreclosures** — Wall Street Journal

Analysis shows that mortgage lenders appear to have regarded Latinos as an untapped demographic of home buyers.



**Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Market Dismal** — HousingFinance.com

Fewer affordable housing units will be built as less money comes in from the bad economy.

**Economists Predict Recession to Get Worse** — Forbes

Two economists, Carmen Reinhart from the University of Maryland and Kenneth Rogoff of Harvard University, predict that housing will not bottom until 2010.

**HUD Attempts to Make Documents Easier** — Washington Post

Most home buyers get lost in the business end of buying a home. **HUD** has produced an updated disclosure form to make it more transparent.

**Which Markets Will Recover When?**

Hank Fishkind, an economic consultant at **Fishkind & Associates**, released his annual Attorneys' Title Insurance Fund real-estate forecast and predicts that local markets will take longer to recover than on the national level.

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By BuildIQ

# GET SERIOUS ABOUT STORM WATER

## Here's a look at how you can implement best management practices on a construction site.

How to handle storm water runoff from construction sites has been one focus of the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) (EPA) for years. The EPA's goal is simple: to improve water

quality by reducing pollutants in stormwater discharges. Although construction sites are not the only source of pollutants, they are receiving significant attention from the EPA, especially in more recent years. The agency has declared that from 2008 to 2010 it will pay close attention to three sectors — home building construction is one — to make sure they properly follow storm water regulations.

### 3 BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

**1** Sediment controls: BMPs that reduce the amount of sediment transported in runoff usually through filtration or gravitational settling

**2** Erosion controls: BMPs that minimize the detachment and transport of soil particles caused by erosion

**3** Runoff controls: BMPs that reduce the amount and speed of runoff flowing through the jobsite or redirect the flow of runoff through or around the site

## Why is stormwater runoff bad?

Imagine what happens when spilled oil, an overflowing Dumpster, loose excavated soil and open bags of concrete are on a job site during a rainstorm. Water that is not absorbed is picked up by the ground. The pollutants are transported to one of two places: either directly into a body of water or into the storm drain system, which eventually discharges into a body of water. If the runoff is polluted, it can damage the environment, including the water used for boating, swimming and drinking.

## Best Management Practices

According to the EPA, the best approach to managing storm water on construction sites is by using self-designed Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plans (SWPPPs). These plans, designed by the home builder, are based on best management practices. Best management practices are measures or practices implemented on a construction site to control or prevent pollution from

## STORMWATER RESOURCES

- EPA's [Stormwater Discharges from Construction Activities](#)
- EPA's [National Menu of Stormwater BMPs](#)
- EPA's [“Developing Your Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan: A Guide for Construction Sites”](#)
- BuildIQ University's online [SWPPP courses](#)
- BuildIQ job site article, [“Getting Your Team on Track with Stormwater Compliance”](#)

entering bodies of water. They may take the form of a process, activity or physical structure. In order to function properly, the systems must be installed correctly, inspected according to the SWPPP and maintained in accordance with the SWPPP. Doing so will help construction sites protect water quality and remain in [compliance](#) with storm water regulations. See the diagram below for ideas. **HG**



**CLICK HERE** To View a Diagram of Storm Water Best Management Practices (BMPs)



Main Street  
H O M E S

CEO SPOTLIGHT

# On the Firing Line

By Bill Lurz, Senior Editor

The CEOs of Main Street Homes hope any future stimulus package that banks on entry-level buyers works.



Photography by Ed Lallo

**David LeBoeuf and Steve Bartholomew** have been home-building partners in Austin, Texas-based Main Street Homes since 1993, but now these erstwhile hunting buddies find themselves following politics more closely than ever. As entry-level builders selling primarily to first-time home buyers, they will have the eyes of the nation this year, as they test whatever economic stimulus programs the Obama administration and Congress come up with this winter to thaw the country's frozen housing markets.

That's because entry-level buyers are the key to jump-starting home sales at every price level. They don't have houses to sell. If young renters start buying their first homes again, the huge inventories of unsold new and existing homes will begin to drop and prices of existing homes will stabilize. The lowest level of ownership housing is where the pump must be primed to free the machinery of the entire marketplace.

There's one more reason Bartholomew and LeBoeuf are point men for housing recovery: The Texas

markets where they build — Austin, San Antonio and College Station — are not as crippled as those in California, Arizona and Florida. Texas was the last place housing sales stopped. Inventories of unsold homes are nowhere near the staggering levels in California and Florida. And LeBoeuf and Bartholomew say they still see price appreciation in their markets.

"Our average sale is about \$133,000, and we don't sell anything for \$200,000," says Steve Bartholomew, "yet houses we sold a few years ago for \$160,000 are now selling for \$200,000. That's what happens when you build a good house and the value of the location goes up. Our markets are still viable."

Austin is the state capital, with a government-based economy. San Antonio has a military-centered economy and bases are growing. "There are a lot of young people in Austin and San Antonio who are ready for home ownership," says David LeBoeuf, "but they are holding back — waiting. They turn on the TV and see the flood of negative

national economic news, especially about housing. Naturally, they think this can't be a good time to buy."

Bartholomew says when Main Street's sales slowed in 2008, he did some research to find out what was happening to the people who were not buying houses. "We learned there's a lot of doubling up going on," he says. "It won't take much more than confidence to get buyers back into the market."

**What Builders Need**

There is one missing piece to the puzzle, the partners say, and that's where Congress can help. By the time this issue reaches you, it may already be in place because the new Congress is pledged to work at breakneck speed.

"Our buyers need down payment assistance," says Bartholomew. "When DPA went away last fall, it took a huge segment of first-time buyers out of the market."

The Main Street partners are convinced their markets will come back faster than others. "What we need is a zero-down FHA loan,"



**THE STATS**

Main Street Homes 2008  
**Giant 400 rank: 152**

**2007 CLOSINGS:**  
Type.....SFD  
Units.....1,008

**2007 REVENUES:**  
Housing.....\$133.1 million

**CURRENT OPERATIONS:**  
Austin (10 locations), San Antonio (8 locations), Bryan/College Station (1 location)

**STRATEGY:**  
Main Street seeks a slightly higher value niche than most entry builders by specifying materials and finishes buyers associate with more expensive homes—while still keeping its average price well below \$150,000 by reducing square footage. The partners also prefer to develop their own communities (very unusual for a Texas entry builder) to assure quality of neighborhoods.

Bartholomew says. "Probably 70 percent of our business is in FHA mortgages. We do some VA business in San Antonio, and there are still a



David LeBoeuf, co-owner (left to right); Greg Smith, vice president of sales; Steve Bartholomew, co-owner; and Chris Folmar, vice president of operations, at model 1423 in Park Ridge Gardens, Austin, Texas

‘It won’t take much more than confidence to get buyers back in the market.’ — Steve Bartholomew



Photography by Ed Lallo



**“A lot of our buyers are working people who thought they would never be able to own a home. Their pride of ownership is, if anything, greater than people in \$300,000 houses.”** — David LeBoeuf

few conventional loans, but the bulk of what we do is FHA. Zero down is the key to this thing. We have prospects who want to buy and can qualify for a mortgage, but they just can't come up with the down payment.”

LeBoeuf is adamant that first-time buyers did not cause the subprime mortgage crash. “Our buyers never used subprime loans,” he says. “That mess was caused by people buying investment properties. If the government authorizes a zero-down program, it should be restricted to owner-occupied dwellings. We'd have no problem with that.”

Bartholomew and LeBoeuf have evidence to back their contention

that first-time home buyers are worthy credit risks. In 2004, they created what they call “The Rainy Day Fund.” Whenever Main Street closes a home, the partners put money into the fund, which is intended to be a safety net if job loss, illness or another calamity jeopardizes home buyers' ability to make the mortgage payment. “We use the fund to help them make mortgage payments until they're back on their feet again,” Bartholomew says. “We've only had to use the Rainy Day Fund five times since its creation. Our delinquency rate is less than the average for all homes. Our buyers have tremendous pride of ownership in their first home.”



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**Velocity Is Vital**

The partners don't deny their business is challenged. "This market is still viable, but it's tough right now," Bartholomew says, "and our operating model is based on high velocity selling to keep the land turning and make up for the low margin on each house."

One reason they don't have to compete with national builders is that the margins they operate at don't look appealing, says LeBoeuf. But right now, they are not building enough houses. When the books close on 2008, Main Street will report about 600 closings for last year, compared with more than

1,000 the previous year. Revenues are expected to be down to about \$75 million, from \$133.1 million in 2007.

**Growth Engine**

Bartholomew and LeBoeuf are determined to regain the momentum lost in 2008. All through the 1990s, Main Street grew by 100 closings or more each year until the firm hit a peak of 1,094 closings in 2001, for \$124.1 million in revenue. But their home town of Austin, Texas, became an increasingly difficult place to entitle new communities during the 2000s, and Main Street's closings shrank

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to 562 in 2005 for \$70 million in revenue. So Main Street expanded to College Station in 2001 and San Antonio in 2004, and pushed closings back to more than 1,000 a year before the crash of 2008.

The partners have a synergistic relationship, and the drive to keep growing. Bartholomew, who headed Fidelity Savings & Loan in Austin until the S & L crash of the late 1980s, is a certified public accountant with experience in finance and the mortgage industry. He gravitates toward the financial management side of the business. LeBoeuf is a career home builder with a gift for fine-tuning production building operations.

“We decided we wanted to be partners in the early 1990s,” Bartholomew recalls, “but we didn’t know what business. Then we thought, ‘Well, David knows construction, and I know mortgage finance, so let’s build some entry houses until something else comes along!’ We’ve never stopped.”

The partners decided their unique

selling proposition would be small, well-built homes — with features and attributes associated with larger, more expensive houses. They now have 10 communities in Austin, eight in San Antonio and one in College Station. “We make all the big decisions together,” LeBoeuf says, “I’m more experienced with product, but Steve has developed a very good eye for design.”

Main Street has two product lines, constantly tweaked by an in-house design staff. “The first line is smaller, more basic homes,” LeBoeuf explains. “The second is more feature-oriented, with vaulted ceilings, ceiling fans, and more options and upgrades offered.

But we never move walls or make structural changes. Generally, our pricing starts below \$100,000 and can go into the \$180,000 range if the buyer loads up on options.

“The art of what we do is in the options and upgrades to finishes and materials that we offer. We allow buyers to add their own touch of class to a home,” LeBoeuf says.



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They run a lean operation, with only 100 employees to sell, build and close as many as 1,000 homes a year. "Margin control is everything for us," says Bartholomew. "We're always balancing cost against value perception."

### Expansion Plans

The partners show no interest in other major markets in Texas. "Houston and Dallas are too far away and too big," Bartholomew says. "We'd have to operate on a scale we're not comfortable with to even be noticed." But they do have strategic growth plans.

"We've looked at Killeen, which is where one of the largest military bases in the country (Fort Hood) is located," LeBoeuf says. "The other expansion we may make is into some attached and multifamily product, and we also might try to add some product aimed at active adults and retirees."

Main Street is developing a new product line to fit on smaller lots.

"We've had 30-foot-wide houses that fit on 40-foot lots for years," Bartholomew notes. "But this year, we want to debut 24-foot-wide houses that fit on 30-foot lots."

Because of the continuing problems with entitlements in Austin, the partners see their future primarily in San Antonio. "It's a much larger market than Austin," says LeBoeuf, "but it still represents less than half our total closings, so we have a lot of room to grow there. Land is cheaper. And it's now a very fragmented market."

Because of the current market shakeout, and the problems of the big public builders, Bartholomew and LeBoeuf believe they have a golden opportunity to grab choice parcels of land and grow market share in San Antonio as housing recovery takes shape.

The only question is: when?

For the answer to that, the Main Street partners are looking to Washington — and crossing fingers. **HG**

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Send to Sara Zailskas  
2000 Clearwater Drive,  
Oak Brook, Ill. 60523 or  
[sara.zailskas@reedbusiness.com](mailto:sara.zailskas@reedbusiness.com)

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### Publisher

Tony Mancini, 610/205-1180, Fax 610/205-1183  
[armancini@reedbusiness.com](mailto:armancini@reedbusiness.com)

### Director of Sales

Jeff Elliott, 616/846-4633, Fax 616/846-4802,  
[jelliott@reedbusiness.com](mailto:jelliott@reedbusiness.com)

### Emedia Solutions Manager

Shannon Darmody, 630/288-7963,  
Fax 630/288-8145  
[shannon.darmody@reedbusiness.com](mailto:shannon.darmody@reedbusiness.com)

### Regional Manager Northeast

CT, DC, DE, MA, ME, MD, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT,  
VA, WV, Eastern Canada  
John Huff, 630/288-8189, Fax 630/288-8145,  
[john.huff@reedbusiness.com](mailto:john.huff@reedbusiness.com)

### Regional Manager Southern United States

AL, AR, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, NM, OK, SC, TN, TX  
Craig Coale, 630/288-8161, 303/265-5990,  
[ccoale@reedbusiness.com](mailto:ccoale@reedbusiness.com)

### Regional Manager Western United States

AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MN, MT, ND, NV, OR, SD,  
UT, WA, WY, Western Canada  
Jessica Elliott, 651/290-7694, Fax 303/265-2064  
[jessica.elliott@reedbusiness.com](mailto:jessica.elliott@reedbusiness.com)

### Regional Manager Midwest

IA, IL, IN, KS, KY, MO, NE, OH, WI  
Tim Gillerlain, 630/288-8168,  
Fax 630/288-8145,  
[tim.gillerlain@reedbusiness.com](mailto:tim.gillerlain@reedbusiness.com)

### Senior Accounts Manager

Michigan and Inside Sales  
Rob Bertrand, 630/288-8615  
Fax 303/265-2526  
[rob.bertrand@reedbusiness.com](mailto:rob.bertrand@reedbusiness.com)

### Inside Sales

Shelley Perez, 630/288-8022  
Fax 630/288-8145  
[shelley.perez@reedbusiness.com](mailto:shelley.perez@reedbusiness.com)

### Administrative Support

Rebecca Breskman, Administrative Assistant  
610/205-1179, Fax 610/205-1183  
[rebecca.breskman@reedbusiness.com](mailto:rebecca.breskman@reedbusiness.com)

### Pat Mustari, Administrative Assistant

630/288-8223, Fax 303/265-5469  
[pmustari@reedbusiness.com](mailto:pmustari@reedbusiness.com)

### Director of Events

Judy Brociek, 630/288-8184, Fax 630/288-8145,  
[jbrociek@reedbusiness.com](mailto:jbrociek@reedbusiness.com)

### Director of Custom Publishing

Emily Yarina, 630/288-8109, Fax 630/288-8145,  
[emily.yarina@reedbusiness.com](mailto:emily.yarina@reedbusiness.com)

### Custom reprints and electronic usage

The YGS Group  
Angie Van Gorder, 717/399-1900 x176  
[angie.vangorder@theygsgroup.com](mailto:angie.vangorder@theygsgroup.com)

### Advertising Production Manager

Victoria Jones, 630/288-8071  
[vjones@reedbusiness.com](mailto:vjones@reedbusiness.com)

### Advertising Contracts

Stephanie West, 630/288-8419  
[stephanie.west@reedbusiness.com](mailto:stephanie.west@reedbusiness.com)

### Graphic Production Manager

Rick Lesser, 630/288-8443  
[rick.lesser@reedbusiness.com](mailto:rick.lesser@reedbusiness.com)

### Editorial & Publishing Office

Housing Giants, 2000 Clearwater Drive, Oak  
Brook, IL 60523 Phone: 630/288-8000,  
Fax: 630/288-8145

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