

## Housing booms fuel 'us vs. them' feelings in Poconos

By [David Pierce](#)

Pocono Record Writer

August 22, 2008 6:00 AM

Part two of a two-part series on the friction between long-time and newer residents in the Poconos.

I came of age in the Poconos, left in the mid 1970s and returned in 2000. That divided experience gives me a different perspective from many lifelong residents or newcomers might have on the area's boom-and-bust residential development, and how it has fueled the ever-present "us vs. them" sentiment.

The early boom period was marked by construction of summer and weekend homes for people who lived elsewhere much of the year. Over time, many homes were converted to year-round residences as more people decided to live here permanently.

The more recent booms have consisted mostly of full-time residential construction, much of it occurring in eight or 10 private gated communities, where deed covenants and community declarations established common restrictions and special fees for community services on top of local property taxes.

Historically the state and townships have provided little regulation or oversight of these homes, some built on steep slopes or wetlands.

Most of the gated communities are in the far-flung corners of the county — urban residents of all persuasions being steered away from the borough centers, even further from their commuter job destinations — in a sort of reverse red-lining.

Perhaps it is this private community trend, more than any other, that has sharpened the "us vs. them" divisions. One of the ironies of this is that, of the handful of developers who built these homes on a massive scale — and heavily advertised in the metro New York area for people there to move into them — many themselves came to the Poconos from the metropolitan region to ply their trade.

The abuses suffered by some local new home-buyers at the hands of a few developers and builders have been well documented. Inflated appraisals, falsification of mortgage documents, use of hidden second mortgages to serve as down payment for the primary mortgage, shoddy construction, failure to complete promised work, failure to perform proper surveys, private amenity and utility disputes.

It's also true that some buyers did not do their homework. They didn't comparison-shop for a builder or lender. They didn't look at pre-existing homes on the market. They didn't hire an attorney to oversee the transaction and protect their interests.

Many responded to slick advertising campaigns and personal sales pitches that gave them a false sense of security, and steered them away from considering other possibilities.

Others underestimated the grueling grind of the long daily job commute needed to pay the mortgage, or didn't understand the lack of high-paying job opportunities here.

A small fraction bought believing that the developer, or a community association, had a designated "super" to fix household problems, as a landlord or super would in a rented apartment.

Others bought here who owned homes before, were treated fairly and openly, and had a good experience. They had no reason to anticipate any shenanigans in store for them in the Poconos.

When former state Attorney General Mike Fisher announced a civil suit earlier this decade against a group of developers, mortgage brokers and appraisers, he was asked what the state intends to do to prevent such things from happening again.

"There's been hardly a day when there wasn't a story in the Pocono Record," Fisher replied.

Fisher had been told that New York and New Jersey residents who are targeted for home-buying scams don't read the Pocono Record. He opted against a state-sponsored educational campaign to warn those residents of the pitfalls of buying a home in the Poconos. Said Fisher, "That would be devaluing Pennsylvania."

Unregulated, uninformed home-buying will continue to spawn more "us vs. them" horror stories when the next inevitable housing boom comes, unless the industry, elected officials and concerned citizens take steps to help ensure that buyers from outside the region know what they're getting into. That should be the focus of all residents, newcomers and natives alike, who truly care about the future of the Poconos.

David Pierce has been a reporter for the Pocono Record since 2000. In 2004 he received the Richard E. Dew Award for Journalistic Service for his coverage of real estate fraud in the Poconos.