

A dedicated builder leaves town
by Jeb Bing, appearing in Pleasanton Weekly

Kenneth Orion Gooch is not a household name in Pleasanton, but it should be. Hundreds of households are in Orion Homes that his company built over the last 34 years. Actively involved in community affairs and youth sports since moving here in 1968, Gooch built his first Pleasanton house on Del Sol Avenue, a 1,400-square-foot mid-level that sold for \$25,000, including \$5,000 for its 7,500-square-foot lot. The home today would be priced in the low \$600,000s. Since then, Gooch has built homes and townhouses throughout the city, including the first few on Pine Hill Lane, a narrow connector street between Neal and Kottinger. His most recent structure is a 10,000-square-foot home in Ruby Hill that sold for \$6 million.

Now, with land increasingly scarce and expensive, he's closing down his Pleasanton operations, selling the Orion Homes office building he built at One Peters Avenue, and moving to Petaluma.

At age 71 with more than 43 years in the business, he is building more affordable homes in nearby Cotati, a city of 6,500 with a population and pro-growth political climate that he finds reminiscent of Pleasanton back in the 1960s.

An admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright, Gooch received his architecture degree from UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design in 1959. He opened his first construction office near the orchards being developed in San Jose, learning from other builders during the day and at special classes at night about the business side of building and designing. In 1962, he moved his new Orion Homes construction and development firm to Livermore. But as slow growth politics took hold in Livermore, Gooch became increasingly frustrated by policies that were reducing available land and raising costs for builders and home buyers, and moved to Pleasanton. One of only a few builders who actually made Pleasanton their home, Gooch built and lived in his own homes right alongside his customers, providing ready access to the hundreds who bought houses from him and wanted advice on adding electric outlets or plumbing changes.

With his wife Judie and son Jason, who is now in the home remodeling business, Gooch was active in community sports. He coached Ballistic United teams for six years and was a Little League baseball coach for another two. He also served on the city's General Plan review committee, helped in the planning of the Vineyard Corridor and served on a committee that recommended approval of the BRIDGES assisted living project, which will be built next year at Junipero Street and Sunol Boulevard.

Gooch also was an early leader in "green building," a term now widely used to define better energy efficiency, recycling, renewable materials and other conservation standards in the building construction industry. A proposed Green Building Ordinance, which Gooch endorses, will be considered by the Pleasanton City Council later this month.

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Gooch says changing tastes among home buyers also drive up costs, as buyers want three, four and even more bathrooms, built in microwaves and double ovens, marble countertops, wood floors, dual air conditioners and furnaces and, of course, more spacious homes that are three- and four-times bigger than his first Del Sol house. With few vacant lots left for a small independent builder like Orion, Gooch says he is priced out of Pleasanton and wants to spend his remaining construction years building more affordable homes. Our loss is clearly Petaluma's gain.

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