Parker Development Co. has helped transform the region since the late Harold Parker founded the company in 1956. From South Sacramento to Folsom and El Dorado County, Parker has paved the way for master-planned residential communities that feature lakes, miles of hiking and biking trails, golf courses and open space.

The El Dorado Hills company has received a host of awards over the years saluting its innovation, its commitment to open space and its positive impact on the community. Its various projects have received at least 14 "community of the year" type awards from groups that lauded the developer's vision.

Parker Development's first substantial project was the 1,250-acre Greenhaven neighborhood in the Pocket area south of downtown Sacramento. The company touts it as the first master-planned community in Sacramento and the first built around an artificial lake.

Greenhaven introduced some features still highly desirable in residential development. It has a three-mile parkway, with pedestrian paths separated from roads by tunnels and bridges. It was the first Sacramento-area development with underground utilities. Its lake was created from an old clay pit.

In 1982, the community won the National Association of Homebuilders' award for the country's best-planned community. With 5,000 residential units, the project was completed in the late 1980s.

Parker's next milestone was the 573-acre Riverlake development in the southern portion of the Greenhaven-Pocket area. A gated subdivision with 3,000 homes, it too features a lake with marinas and greenbelts.

A FOCUS ON NATURE

Natural elements continue to play a big role in Parker developments. Hiking and bike trails are an integral part of The Parkway, a 612-acre residential development in Folsom. Built on an old gravel mining site, the community has 2,400 units designed around the Humbug Willow Creek nature corridor.

And Serrano in El Dorado Hills has more than 30 percent of its 3,500 acres dedicated to open space, including oak groves, creeks and a golf course. It is one of the largest planned communities in California, with more than 6,000 homes, plus retail and commercial areas.

The company's emphasis on open space resonated with the judging panel for Best Real Estate Projects.

"Parker Development really seems to listen to their customers and delivers communities that serve them well," said judge Amy Lerseth, noting that the open space, mature groves of oaks and recreational amenities help draw families to the Sacramento area.

Judges also applauded Parker's innovation. "It felt like the Parker family was willing to take some risk and decide, 'We are going to do it our way.' They do quality work and they set their own standards," said judge Robert Boucher.

Parker's three newest developments are all in the planning stages in El Dorado County. The 2,341-acre Village of Marble Valley, located off Bass Lake Road, will include various types of housing and commercial space, a village center, two public schools, vineyards, parks and miles of walking and biking trails.

Serrano Westside and Pedregal, both in El Dorado Hills, are much smaller with 527 acres combined.

Projects judge Allison Otto has attended some of the meetings related to the future El Dorado developments. Too many developers only pay...
attention to how many houses they can put on a block, she said, but Parker is really promoting a feeling of community.

**CONSISTENCY AND CHANGE**

Parker Development is now run by the founder’s son, Bill and Jim Parker. Bill Parker has served as president since 1976. Vice president Jim Parker joined 10 years later after a stint with Price Waterhouse in San Francisco.

Consistency extends beyond the family staying in control for all these years. Just as Greenhaven won a Best Planned Community Award from the National Association of Home Builders in 1982, so did Serrano in 1997. The company remains lean, with only about 20 employees, and several key people have been on board for 20 years or more.

But the business has changed a lot since the 1980s, and Parker Development has had to change with it. "We are so much more heavily regulated in everything we do," Jim Parker said. "That creates an added burden for any developer."

In the 1960s, the norm was for a developer to unroll a carpet of houses on untouched acreage outside of town. Today, it’s considered urban sprawl.

"When greenfield projects made sense, we did them," said Kirk Bone, Parker’s director of governmental relations. "Now you have to go where infrastructure is reasonably available. We are adapting to the times."

Land-use decisions always have been under the control of local cities and counties, said Andrea Howard, Parker’s principal planner. "But what we have begun to see in the last five or six years is much more of a statewide and regional influence on land-use decisions."

Two examples are Assembly Bill 32, which sets statewide goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and Senate Bill 253, which promotes coordinated land-use and transportation systems.

Jim Parker points to the development of El Dorado Hills, spurred in the 1960s by activity at the Aerocet plant miles away in Rancho Cordova, as a phenomenon of days past.

"We could no more do that today than we could go to the moon ourselves," he said. Now the goal is to maximize infrastructure already available.

"But the challenge with infill sites from a developer’s position is you have a lot more neighborhood interest in your project," Howard said. "It is much more important to have public information plans available to explain what you are proposing."

Parker Development often does common-interest development, which means having to set up and manage homeowners associations. They, too, face more regulation these days.

Then there’s the area of financing.

"Because of the ups and downs of the industry, institutional lenders are much more reluctant to offer financing than they used to be," Parker said. The company has had to look for other types of financing, including setting up Mello-Roos Districts and selling bonds to cover the initial cost of infrastructure.

Federal government became a bigger player in the late 1980s and early 1990s. "I don’t use the terms ‘harder’ or ‘easier,’ it’s just a factor: it’s just another moving part that you have to deal with," Bone said.

"The company seems to have adapted well to the changing regulatory environment. I have worked with them as a planner for 15-plus years. It has always been professional and collaborative," said Roger Trout, director of development for El Dorado County. "That has always been appreciated, because this is a tough business to be in."

"They always show up and advocate their position very politely," Trout added. "It is rarely adversarial. It’s an acquired skill, and a lot of people don’t have a top skill set. They do a great job of prep work and communicating."

**TECH TOOLS**

While government regulation has added to the workload, technology has helped lighten it. One such tool is Ladar, a combination of laser light and radar used to survey land.

"You fly a plane over a piece of ground that’s may be 2,000 or 3,000 acres, and it literally takes a picture of every rock on the ground," Bone said. Developers can use the images to tell whether a stand of trees are blue oaks rather than valley oaks, or they can electronically strip off the trees to see the ground contours.

Technology allows Parker’s projects to use recycled water for irrigation and industrial uses, and the sewers are now water tight and air tight, said Tom Howard, the company’s vice president of construction.

Thanks to the Internet, paperwork moves faster. Electronic transfers make it easier to manage does for homeowners associations. And Parker Development has created websites where the public can read proposals and objectives, leave comments and subscribe to project updates. But Parker Development knows how to pace itself. Greenhaven, for instance, started on a smaller scale and the company’s projects grew gradually.

"Bill (Parker) has been able to anticipate the highs and the lows," Howard said. "We don’t overbuild or over-finance or hire too many people. There is not a lot of hierarchy. Everybody wears a lot of hats and is willing to do whatever needs to be done."