



An opportunity to help my son and daughter-in-law build a new home on a tight timetable turned into a great opportunity to make a good design better and streamline the build process. Here's my update and tips that helped me on my current project...



"Second time around"

The Background

Since becoming a part-time "special projects guy" in 2021 after my daughter Rachel Huntman purchased our family business, I still enjoy learning and testing new ideas about the home building process. **Preston Feather** plays a key role the construction cycle, from up-front collaboration on design, material specs, sourcing and supply process. With so many talented builder customers, innovative products and new technologies, there is plenty to learn on every project.

The First Time Around

Back in October 2019, we decided to invest heavier in training our PF staff and much needed next generation of young builders. The result was "class project" spec home we designed, financed and built on a tax-sale lot in a dormant development (near Shanty Creek).

We partnered with a young builder who was eager to learn. We introduced some new materials and methods while providing "hands-on" building experience to many PF staff.

All design details, materials selections and finishes were determined collaboratively up front. A critical path schedule was developed with key milestone dates – shared this using a web-based project management app.

The 1,860 sq. ft. semi-custom walkout style home was completed in March 2020 (mid-pandemic), less than 6 months after breaking ground. The home was featured in the 2020 TC HBA “pandemic” virtual home tour. Scott Sanders, a PF Sales Leader, ran this project for us.



All involved say how **eye opening** it was to put ourselves in the builder’s shoes – and everyone loved learning **hands-on**. We proved to ourselves how a buildable design, labor saving materials, early decision making, a skilled team and project schedule communication can improve productivity and **shorten the build cycle**. We did a project post-mortem to document lessons learned for “a next time”, if there ever was one after the pandemic...

“First Time Around”



The Second Time Around

Fast forward to 2024. Here we go again! In November 2023 my son and his family needed to relocate back “home” to Boyne City from SE Michigan. The deadline was fall 2024. Few homes were for sale and options were thin. In January 2024 we came up with a possible solution: what if we could find an interested PF customer builder and appropriate lot in the Boyne City area to build our original Shanty Creek “spec” home design (with same finishes) by fall 2024? A longshot – but why not try?

We got lucky. A whirlwind search resulted in a lot that fit the home design in a development where a PF builder customer was interested and available to squeeze our project into the 2024 schedule. Given the timeframe, there were strings attached – and agreed upon:

- The home would be supplied, wherever possible, by Preston Feather materials (working with respective PF product sales specialists). This was to help us control more variables, streamline the process and minimize risk of delays.
- We would minimize changes to the original (and tested) design, materials and finishes. The biggest scope change was decision to finish the lower level (adding 1,500 ft², 2 bedrooms and a bath).
- The project needed to be completed by October 2024 (or sooner).
- The home would be constructed using pre-manufactured wall panel components with Zip R-3 insulated sheathing. In this case our builder customer had a small crew and did his own framing – he had not used panelized walls or the Zip system on his previous projects. We would need to provide training.



So we got moving

- Bought land in February
- Broke ground in March.
- Panels, trusses and roof completed in May
- Rough-in mechanicals and drywall completed August
- Currently in final stages: paint, floors, cabinets, interior doors, trim and landscaping.
- On schedule for occupancy in early October.



If that seems pretty fast in today's world, it is.

We used lessons learned from our 2019 experience – plus ideas from our new builder and fresh set of PF team member eyes on the project.

What worked even better the second time around?

- **Started with a proven, build-tested design.** We customized a plan that we knew worked well with lessons learned about design decisions, materials selections, project schedules, and feedback from the eventual homebuyer.
- **Used pre-constructed wall panels (vs. manual framing).** This forced a much closer review of plans and earlier decisions related to engineered components (trusses, floors, beams), window/door opening schedules, insulation, siding, foundation design, drywall and interior trim details. Early issue identification produced a better, more “buildable” plan.
- **Conducted more plan review jam sessions up front.** Included all product categories and disciplines. Uncovered engineering and dimension issues, and solved problems on paper. For example, window openings were adjusted a few inches to reduce tempered glass costs or optimize cabinet locations.
- **Leveraged knowledge from all Preston Feather team members touching the project.** Sourced and supplied more content for more finished space (design, foundation, framing, roofing, decking, windows, doors, garage doors, cabinets, countertops, trim and gas fireplace).
- **Used Simple Google Drive File System (cloud app)** to store and share the master version of all construction documents with the builder, homeowner, subs and suppliers. Controlled versions of plans and installation drawings. Easier to share, review and update on mobile devices at the job site. I created the Google Drive folders and shared it with our builder as joint “editors”.
- **Reviewed the builder’s preferred schedule and critical path** milestones, decision deadlines and homeowner responsibilities. Worked with PF staff to understand lead times for specially ordered items (windows, doors, cabinets, for example).
- **Asked builder for his ideas on how to help streamline the build process.** Also listened to recommendations to understand tradeoffs between time, quality and cost.
- **Conducted detailed schedule and budget reviews each month with the builder.** This generated action items for me and the builder.

The Overall Lesson?

Simply put, building this home “again” with a highly collaborative team willing to learn and try new things is producing more finished ft² in less time and on schedule while freeing capacity to build more homes. I’ve really enjoyed having my builder critique our design and educate me on his best practices. In turn, he’s been receptive to trying some new processes and products that help his business . We also created housing for another family in a tough economic environment. A win-win-win.

Residential home construction is just like manufacturing – except it's outdoors in variable weather conditions and different job sites.

Dimensions and tolerances are not nearly as precise. Wood moves. Designs vary. Product supply chains (quality and logistics) are not always dependable. There are many opportunities for delays.

The solution to a shorter, quality build home building cycle boils down to basics:



- Work off the same versions of prints & specs
- Make design decisions and material selections up front
- Take weather variables out of the equation wherever possible. There are only so many “good build days” each year Monday through Friday in Northern Michigan.
- Select materials that require less labor and time to install.
- Componentize the construction process where possible.
- Establish a critical path schedule and communicate/coordinate with supply chain partners, subs and the homeowner
- Start with a good team and good partnerships

So – we’re heading toward the finish line. Soon I’ll getting a workout helping move my son and his family into their new home.

I’ll provide an update in our next newsletter. Maybe there are some ideas here you can use on your next project with Preston Feather.

Kirk Jabara

kjabara@prestonfeather.com