

# Builds Character

*Starting over in a new market isn't a problem if you're offering SIPs.*

As far back as 1980, Curtis L. Stendel was building with structural insulated panels, commonly known as SIPs. Stendel got his start in the industry building livestock buildings, cold storage and freezer buildings in Minnesota.

“Even back then, they were pretty advanced in controlling humidity, ventilation and air quality in these animal containment facilities,” recalls Stendel. “It’s kind of interesting to note that they are now finally applying many of those concepts to residential housing. Hopefully, we can catch up in the game a little bit.”

A wave of consolidation in the livestock industry in the 1990s caused many of the construction jobs to dry up. That’s when Stendel and his wife Sue concentrated on creating homes for humans instead, forming Panelworks Plus in 2001. “Considering the abuse livestock dishes out on a building, constructing houses is pretty easy,” says Stendel.

## A LEAP OF FAITH

In addition to launching a new business, the Stendels decided the time was ripe to relocate north of the Twin Cities, to take advantage of growing opportunities in and around St. Francis, MN.

“We knew we didn’t want to deal with city traffic anymore. We found a place and made an offer and they accepted. We didn’t know a soul. We had no contacts and no leads. So it was a real blind leap of faith,” recalls Stendel. It’s the kind of jump that causes many builders to shudder in sympathy. “It builds character,” admits Stendel.

But Stendel credits his SIP supplier, Extreme Panel Technologies (North Cottonwood, MN), with furnishing the leads and referrals the new business needed to create a following for this SIP system.

Although the first year was lean, every year since they’ve more than doubled their

business. Now, the couple is creating SIP shell packages for more than 30 homes annually. Business is so good, Panelworks



Plus has recently become a distributor and fabricator for Extreme Panel Technologies.

Most of their clients are homeowners intrigued with the SIP home’s proven energy

performance. “I learned long ago that it’s a waste of time to approach conventional contractors and try to get them to switch. Most simply don’t want to change the way they do business. If they are interested in SIPs, they’ll find us,” Stendel says.

In addition to offering shell packages, Stendel is also finding success using SIPs for below grade walls. “This may include basement floor panels, basement walls, foundation walls and floors for above grade use over unconditioned air space such as three- and four-season sunrooms,” Stendel says. Panelworks Plus spends much of its time educating owners, owner/builders and general contractors retained to build their first SIP home.

“The majority of our business is referrals. A single home that we build often leads to two or three other clients in the next year or two. We build a house for a client, they love its performance and two years later they are true believers, telling all their friends and family about it.”

This same positive word of mouth led to Panelworks Plus helping construct the Energy House 3 in Elk River, MN. Organizers were convinced of the system’s benefits after touring an SIP demonstration house at the 1998 International Builders’ Show in Dallas.

One thing led to another, as the saying goes. Now Panelworks Plus is providing shell construction services and supervision, with Extreme Panel Technologies providing the panels. A host of other SIPA members have donated to the project. (See story on page 66.)

Stendel says it’s gratifying to be involved in such an educational project. “Architects, designers, mortgage industry, realtors and developers, many of them are missing the boat on lower energy costs,” he says. “But with the help of educational tools like this one, we can change a few minds.” ■

Photos courtesy of Panelworks Plus.