

# Spate of new office buildings rapped

By Joanne Maliszewski  
staff writer

At a time when Farmington Hills residents are frustrated with the city's growth, office buildings are bearing the brunt of the residential ire.

The complaints range from the office buildings being too close to

homes, to drawing too much traffic, to just being offices in a community residents thought would remain a bedroom community.

Yet, according to market analysts, real estate agents and city officials, the Farmington Hills office market is healthy. Despite rumors of incredible vacancies, office buildings are filling at a steady pace.

"A battle is going on. Farmington Hills is gaining more and more inroads. It (the Hills) poses a serious threat to the office base in Southfield," said Joel Feldman, vice president and office analyst for the Southfield-based Hayman Co.

Farmington Hills is reaping the benefits of major companies in Southfield looking for branch offices,

as well as those companies looking for exposure along I-96, Feldman said.

NINE MONTHS ago, office buildings in Farmington Hills were having problems with vacancies. But the market has since improved.

"The supply and demand is in a better countenance now," Feldman said.

He admits that traffic has had a "detrimental effect on the speed at which certain office buildings have been or are being leased. Some office buildings here did experience difficulty nine months ago. But with planned widenings and interchanges in the planning, problems are being alleviated," Feldman said.

Bill Bowman Jr. of Farmington Hills-based Thompson-Brown Realtors agrees with Feldman.

"We're not leasing at some outrageous levels like Troy. But we are absorbing on a steady level," he said. Developers in Farmington Hills "are typically conservative," Bowman said. That means they are not going to stick out their financial necks by building when there isn't enough of a market.

"THEY HAVEN'T set the world on fire. It's been slower than expected. But we haven't seen vacancies on a long-term basis," Bowman continued.

Office rents, he said, are smack in the middle of the price range. Buildings that are 5-10 years old generally run \$15-\$15.50 a square foot. The newer ones range \$15-\$17.

"We're certainly not overpriced. We're relatively inexpensive compared to other communities," Bowman said. Average rents in the Birmingham-Bloomfield area, for example, run \$20-\$22 a square foot.

A 5-10 percent vacancy rate is considered normal, said Dean Babb, Farmington Hills assessor. "It's not unusual to have vacancies in an office."

Speculative building is no longer the trend.

"These guys aren't dumb. They aren't building tax shelters," Babb said, in light of new tax laws.

The city's industrial-research and high-tech facilities are also filling at a steady pace. The Hills Tech Park near I-96 has undergone "a lot of construction. Once up and built, they have been about 60 percent occupied in one project and 100 percent in another," Bowman said.

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DESPITE A positive prognosis for office buildings, Farmington Hills City Manager William Costick is concerned about continued office growth in Southfield and Troy and the effect it might have on Farmington Hills offices.

But Feldman believes that Farmington Hills is in good stead because companies no longer see the Spectrum Center and Triad in Southfield "as the furthestmost extension of the office expansion. Farmington Hills continues to fill in nicely," he said.

Yet Costick is just as concerned about the number of hotels/motels in Farmington Hills.

"We had a shortage at one time. Now, so many have been built. I'm concerned that we have reached the point where maybe we shouldn't be building anymore," he said.

Within the last two years, 880 new rooms have been built, he added.

## Views differ on office growth

Continued from Page 1

is not a glut of offices in Farmington Hills," he said.

Some residents might not agree. To support their claims, residents point to rows of offices along Northwestern Highway, 12 Mile and Orchard Lake Road.

The best guess shows that the city is approximately 80 percent developed with a mix of about 65 percent residential and 35 percent commercial.

Longtime residents might see the growth of offices and industrial-research facilities as a plague on the city. Without them, Costick said, "a greater part of the tax burden would fall on the residents."

"THE RESIDENTS are frustrated. With all the growth, resi-

dents feel taxes should be lower. But with all the growth, there's a big demand on services, especially capital improvements. In the long run, though, it will help balance the tax base and rates that have to be levied," Costick said.

Though residents may — and often do — dispute it, city officials maintain they have been diligent in upholding the master land use plan.

"We have set forth real good density controls," Costick said. "We have set lower density than we could have. If (the city) is largely set as a residential community with a good mix of commercial."

As two neighboring communities, Farmington Hills and Southfield are often compared.

Unlike Southfield, Costick said, Farmington Hills maintains building height controls that, in turn, control density and eliminate high-rise office and apartment buildings.

The concrete and glass that's characteristic of Northwestern Highway and the 12 Mile office corridor are definitely a change from the former semirural community that many residents sought.

"We're not just a bedroom community anymore," Costick said. "The community has changed, there's no question. We have done our very best to control the changes through land use. I don't think the city has let growth go unbridled. The development that has occurred is good development."

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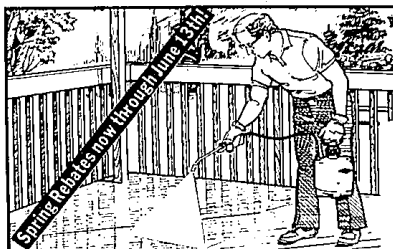
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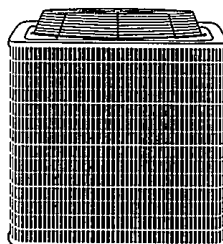
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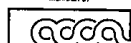


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