

Construction forecast short of rosy

Edward Cicero's forecast for the construction industry here in 1993 — cloudy with a possibility for partial clearing.

Cicero, president of the Detroit chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America and vice president of operations for Millgard Environmental of Livonia, spoke Monday to the Economic Club of Detroit.

"Being able to keep our contracting organizations together during the recession, satisfy our customers and achieve any profit has taken a heavy toll on the construction industry in southeast Michigan," he said.

Three major changes — unprecedented competition among contractors, shrinking or non-existent profit margins and shifting of more risks from owners to contractors — are taking place in the local marketplace, Cicero said.

But he found some bright spots.

"If the Clinton Administration delivers on its intention to invigorate our infrastructure and designs an urban redevelopment program for cities like Detroit, and does it with a kinder and gentler economic stimulus than past presidents who have been saddled with the task of getting the nation out of a recession, then we will have made some progress."

Later, in an interview, Cicero said that kinder and gentler alluded to taxation. He added that



Edward Cicero: "I hope I don't sound too gloomy. There are many potential bright spots on the horizon."

unfocused, make-work projects just to stimulate the economy could cause more harm than good. "It should be thought out and well-planned," he said.

During his address, Cicero cited a transportation improvement program planned by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments that could provide up to \$1.5 billion for new roads, improvements and other projects from 1993-95. Gov. John Engler also is pursuing a Build Michigan infrastructure program, Cicero

said. "So expect to see more Construction Ahead signs as you drive around southeast Michigan in 1993."

But Cicero said in his talk to the Economic Club that he's concerned about where the incoming administration is headed on environmental issues.

"If the vice president-elect has his way, the environmental side could tighten so much that the infrastructure program will never get off the ground," he said.

"The Clean Air Act has provisions that discourage construction. Hopefully, the new administration will realize that and ease it, you have to break a few eggs," he said.

Cicero also called for tax credits and the ability to withdraw down payments from individual retirement accounts without penalty for first-time home buyers.

"It is no secret that residential construction leads the construction industry into a recession and it leads us out of a recession," he said.

Detroit has excellent potential for construction activity, he said, citing recent efforts to build residential subdivisions like Victoria Park and a new Veterans Medical Center.

"I think Diane Edgecomb, president of the Central Business District Association, hit the nail right on the head when she men-

tioned during my research for these remarks that 'Detroit is non-competitive when it comes to taxation. Many voices need to reach out and complain, about that fact,'" he said.

Cicero also reiterated growth and redevelopment projects at Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport, Willow Run Airport and M-59 forecast by economic development officials.

Cicero closed his presentation by urging special help for small business owners, especially those in the manufacturing sector.

"If we don't act soon to help the owners of our manufacturing facilities modernize their plants, help them secure long-term capital financing, then we are headed toward disaster," he said.

"Expanding small manufacturing plants creates bread and butter projects for the construction industry," he said.

Later, Cicero elaborated on his remarks during an interview. "I think you're going to see some growth, but I think it will be slow," he said. "The buzzword going on is Stay Alive Until '95."

"That may be true. We won't see a drastic change in '93. It's going to be gradual," Cicero said. "The last time we came out of a recession, there was pent-up demand and money available."

"That isn't the case now, he said.

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Shouldn't you reach for the bleach?

When discolored areas won't sand off or you wish to lighten the wood's color, reach for the bleach.

Stripping a piece of furniture will lighten it, but bleaching for cosmetic purposes will make the wood look fresher still. This simple technique can transform a chair, picture frame or entire room of wall paneling.

When dissimilar woods have been used in a piece of furniture, the darker parts can be bleached to produce a uniform tone.

Simple laundry bleach, used full strength, may be enough to remove water stains, ink stains or other blemishes, or to lighten oak ash, mahogany, maple, walnut and beech. Other species — chestnut, poplar, cedar, rosewood and cherry, for example — resist bleaching.

If laundry bleach doesn't do the job, try a commercial two-step wood bleach. Such wood bleaching kits, sold at hardware stores and home centers, contain sodium hydroxide (lye) and hydrogen peroxide mixed together. Used improperly, these strong compounds can ruin good furniture. Always test the bleach in an inconspicuous spot.

Two-step bleaches are very caustic. Follow the directions on the label carefully. With any type of bleach, gloves, old clothing and safety goggles, and work in a well-ventilated area.

The key to getting a good bleaching job is removing all the old finish before you start. A thorough stripping job is vital; even the slightest patch of old finish will prevent bleach from penetrating, leaving a dark stain. To test the wood after you have stripped it, wet it. If it

darkens evenly, it will bleach to a uniform color. Any areas that remain light must be stripped again.

Here are some helpful tips:

■ Protect the work area with newspapers covered with plastic garbage bags.

■ Remove all metal hardware; the metal may be attacked by the bleach.

■ Use an old brush or a clean cloth pad to apply an even coat of household bleach to the wood. (The two-step kits recommend using a plastic sponge or a paintbrush with nylon bristles.) Wipe evenly along the grain over the entire surface. Avoid overlapping onto the sections that have already been bleached.

■ Leave the surface wet for 30 minutes, then neutralize it with a 50-50 solution of white vinegar and water. Rinse with warm water.

■ Let the wood dry for three hours before you decide whether it needs another application. Use spot applications to touch up areas where the color is uneven. Neutralize and rinse after each application.

■ Note that the two-step process is self-neutralizing after the first application.

■ Allow the wood to fade to a shade slightly darker than the desired color; it will appear lighter after it dries.

■ When bleaching a dark spot, it's best to treat the whole surface so you don't leave a light spot surrounded by dark.

■ Don't overdo it. After four or five applications, the wood may start to look gray and lifeless. If that happens, improve its appearance by wiping on a light stain to highlight the grain.

■ Let the wood dry overnight or as long as the

label directions recommend.

■ Because the bleach will have raised the grain of the wood slightly, sand twice: first with a medium sandpaper, then with a finer grit. But sand carefully; if done too vigorously, you can sand through to the original color.

■ After bleaching, protect the wood with a wipe-on oil finish.

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Pricey kitchen features add up

The average new kitchen costs \$16,491 today, according to the National Kitchen and Bath Association in Hackensack, N.J. That includes cabinets, countertops, appliances and labor.

The trade group has compiled some examples of high-end features and percentages of kitchens that have them:

■ Custom-made cabinets, 50 percent.

■ Planning center and desk, 37 percent.

■ For use by more than one cook at a time, 30 percent.

■ More than one sink, 20 percent.

■ Television, video and/or stereo equipment, 16 percent.

■ A \$28,000-plus price tag, 14 percent.

■ More than 400 square feet of floor space, 8 percent.

■ Granite countertops, 5 percent.

■ Marble countertops, 1 percent.

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